ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

The Jungle Call

by

Coralie Stanton and Heath Hosken

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXII CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER 24, 1925 NUMBER 5

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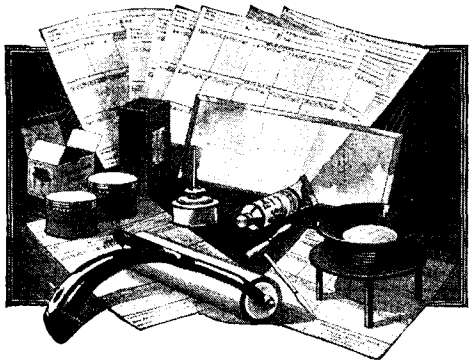

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Classified Advertising

The Purpose of this Department is to put the reader in touch immediately with the newest needfuls for the home, office, farm, or person; to offer, or seek, an unusual business opportunity, or to suggest a service that may be performed satisfactorily through correspondence. It will pay a housewife or business man equally well to read these advertisements carefully.

Classified Advertising Rates In The Munsey Magazines:

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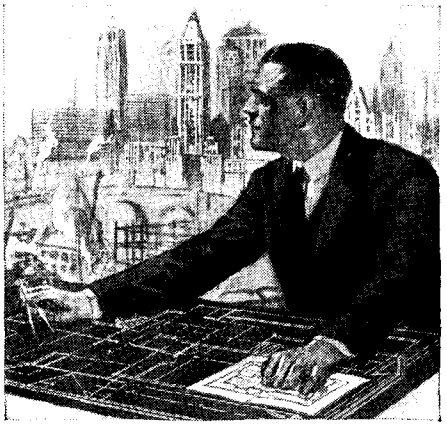

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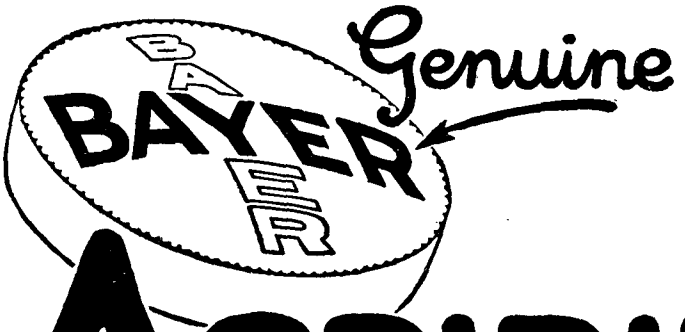

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXII SATURDAY, OCTOBER 24, 1925 NUMBER 5

The Jungle Call

By CORALIE STANTON and HEATH HOSKEN

Authors of "The Great Outlaw," etc.

CHAPTER I.

WHEN THE TUSKER CHARGES HOME.

ONE of the terrific thunderstorms of Equatorial Africa was growling itself away in the distance.

To the west, through the giant, smooth-trunked trees of the forest, festooned thickly with creepers and fleshy tropical vines, the sky glowed in a dull copper band, where the sun struggled with the steaming mists.

Around the camp, where a fenced clearing had been made, the earth and undergrowth were colored a weird red-purple, like strawberries dipped in wine. The interior of the primeval forest was a dense green-black, a wall of darkness, with here and there a bunch of brilliant tropical flowers hanging like a display of fireworks in a night sky.

Paul Cameron sat in a large hut made of poles, with walls and thatched roof of the thick, reed-like grass of the Uganda swamps. The wide entrance was closely netted against mosquitoes. At the back, one flap of his sleeping tent was brought into the hut, or *banda,* thus forming one apartment, the *banda* being used as a mess and living room by the party.

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The big game hunting expedition had been brought to a sudden close by the tragic death of one of its members, a youth of splendid promise, who had been fatally gored in a charge by a wounded bull elephant just a month ago.

Cameron, the leader of the expedition, and a hunter already known in various parts of the world for his prowess, was cleaning the dead boy's gun once more before packing it away with the rest of his kit to send back to his mother in England.

A gloomy task, in keeping with the angry red and copper of the last short hour of the tropical day, in keeping with the green blackness of the forest, in keeping with the ceaseless drip, drip of the rank vegetation, in keeping with the drum beating that sounded faintly from the nearest native village some miles away toward the banks of the Nile.

Gloomy was Cameron's face, too; stern, much aged by several weeks' growth of yellow beard and a bad bout of malaria. Plainly he was at war with his fellow men; there was the suggestion in his drawn brows and folded masterful lips of trying to bear something unbearable.

A time of unbearable trial to a man of his temper this last month had been, indeed.

He had been laid low with fever at the time of the accident and had not been able to accompany the body of the dead boy on its long journey by native porters and river steamer, motor car and railway train to the coast, where it was placed on board ship to make the still longer journey home. His companion and trusted friend, Robert Grant, had performed that melancholy task.

Grant had been delayed in returning by missing the steamer and had had to make the river journey in a canoe. As soon as he had come back, he had taken some boys and gone off on a trek after meat for the *safari*.

Cameron, still too weak to move, was thus left virtually alone, for the third white member of the party was not very congenial to him—a doctor, Luke Merridew, whom they had met in Mombassa and who had been attached to the expedition because they were later going to spend several months in excavating some very ancient ruins in an almost inaccessible desert and would have an army of native boys with them, so that a doctor's services would be of the greatest use.

Merridew had already shown himself a clever doctor and a first class shot. He had been out with young Lacey when the accident happened, and he had done all he could at grave personal risk, but the infuriated elephant had swung round with his prey after the charge, one tusk through the poor boy's body, and was hidden in the twelve foot grass, and thus the doctor could not get in a telling shot before the damage was done.

Cameron didn't know why he found a little of Merridew's company went a long way. There was nothing against him. The doctor knew his Africa from A to Z, and spoke almost every native language.

He was really to be pitied, poor chap, because he was quite a young man and he had a young wife in a lunatic asylum. Cameron could not but sympathize when Merridew cursed the divorce laws.

At the moment Merridew was lying down in his tent, also with a touch of fever.

Suddenly the air became full of the musical flexible Luganda language, interspersed with laughter and excited chattering. Cameron looked up and saw the camp clearing invaded by some twenty boys, naked but for their calico petticoats, and all bearing baskets filled to the brim with great raw lumps of elephant flesh.

In the center appeared the head Somali gun bearer, in his old khaki suit; on either side of him were his assistants, and behind them four boys carried two splendid tusks. Behind them, again, was a small body guard armed with spears, two Congolese among them, splendid warriors, with their masses of incised cuts on face and naked body, and smeared from head to foot with red clay, presenting a fearsome appearance, but to Bwana Buffalo as gentle as children, as meek as slaves.

Robert Grant detached himself and came into the *banda*, while the *safari* scattered to its tents, and the Goanese cook and his mate dashed out to secure partridges, a buck impala, and guinea fowl for the white man's table.

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"Had some luck, I see, Bobbie," said Cameron, as his friend carefully closed the mosquito netting, which was threaded on to thin iron rods, forming a cage. His voice was low by nature, one of those quiet voices that big men often have. But his mood made it sound more like a growl. "A nice crop of bites you've picked up, too!"

"I know." Grant laughed dryly and put his hand to his face, scarcely recognizable from the havoc the mosquitoes had wrought. Below his khaki shorts his knees and an inch or so of calf above the high boots of soft leather with soles of elk hide, were one mass of inflamed poisoned flesh.

He put his twelve bore Paradox down on one of the camp tables and, going to a pile of chests, took an iodine bottle out of the topmost one and proceeded to apply a strong dark coating to his virulent insect stings. He was a small, close-knit Scotsman; his face was hard-bitten in more senses than one—that is to say, beneath the angry blotches of mosquito bites one perceived a dried russet apple, "all weather" skin.

He had a small bullet head, cropped dark hair, a square forehead, short nose and puckered chin, and a little rat-trap of a mouth, surrounded now with a stubble of wiry dark hair. His green-gray eyes twinkled with dry humor, not fun. He was a bachelor and had the reputation of being rich but mean.

He paid his full share of the expenses and, being junior partner in a firm of Scotch distillers, had made generous gifts of whisky to the stores. Cameron and he were as David and Jonathan. It was a case of opposites meeting.

"The country is a quagmire," he said in his dogmatic voice. "We had a three hours' trek yesterday up to our armpits in water. We very nearly lost two boys in elephant holes. Do the rains often go on as long as this?"

"No, it's unusual," Cameron replied morosely. "June generally sees the end of them. How did you get the elephant, Bobbie?"

"Brain shot with the six-point-five Männlicher," was the answer. "He went back on his haunches, and I put a dose from the four-fifty into his heart."

"Good shooting!"

"Oh, no, just luck," said Bobbie, knowing the bitterness in his friend's heart because he had been lying helpless in camp.

The air was quivering with nervous tension. Grant, healthily fatigued, with a fine tusker to his credit, was proof against the electrical atmosphere. He was one of those tough little men without imagination who can live through crisis after crisis and remain unmoved.

But Cameron, with the fever still in his blood, a creature built on a much bigger scale, deeper, more powerful in heart and brain, reacted to the storm in a sudden outburst of temper. Laying the gun he had been cleaning on the table beside him, he exclaimed violently:

"I'm sick to death of the whole thing! We'll pack up and be off to-morrow. It's a hideous life. The dullness of it—the dullness!" His dominant face was heavy and lowering with resentment; his dark blue eyes expressed the very sum of disillusionment with life.

His shoulders sank dispiritedly, as if nothing were worth while, as a soldier may feel when a fierce and long-drawn battle is over at last. This last month, without danger except from illness, without hardship and risk, without the constant test of nerve and hand and eye, had made him as fretful as a woman.

"We were going off anyhow as soon as we can get packed up, can't we?" Grant asked.

The simple question seemed to infuriate his friend.

"Of course we are, you cursed fool!" he shouted.

"You're ratty, Paul," was all the Scotchman said. "I do wish you'd stop brooding over Lacey's death. It can't help, and it's making you impossible to live with."

"How would you feel in my place?" asked Cameron roughly. "His mother put him in my charge—her only son, all she had in the world. She let him go because he was with me. 'I know you won't let any harm come to him, Paul.' That was her good-by to me.

"And I'm laid up with fever, and you're on a trek on your own after oryx, and the

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cursed doctor chap takes the boy out and lets him try a head shot with a little rifle instead of stopping the brute with the .450. An inexperienced lad! Merridew ought to be tried for murder."

"He took big risks trying to save him, according to all accounts," remarked Grant.

"What was the good of that?" growled his friend.

"Where is he now, Paul?"

"In his tent, as far as I know. Said he had a touch of fever."

"Paul!"

"Yes?" surlily.

"I know you're not keen on Merridew, and I don't want to put you off him, because he'll undoubtedly be useful when we get to Lake Rudolf, but he'll have to be watched."

"What do you mean?"

"Whisky."

"Lord, Bobbie, what a fuss! Do you mean he takes too much?"

"I think so. There are several bottles missing. He was decidedly queer once or twice before I went on this last trek. I didn't tell you because you were seedy. But you ought to know."

For some reason or other this confidence, a most natural one, only further irritated Cameron, and he gave a scornful laugh.

"When it comes to taking a drink or two too much in this infernal climate, Bobbie, it's not a capital sin. I know how your Scotch soul must feel it, but my advice is—don't count the whisky bottles too often."

Grant took up his gun with a little fling of his compact shoulders and went indignantly out of the *banda,* saying:

"Thanks, Paul, I'll not stay here to be insulted. If I do get on your nerves, maybe I'll not come to Lake Rudolf after all."

At the same moment boys came in with candles in storm lanterns that they hung on the walls, and the table servant to prepare for the evening meal, while from outside the clearing in the fast falling darkness came the crackle and blaze of the camp fires that would be kept alight all night to frighten away the big cats on the prowl.

Cameron took the dead boy's gun and put it in its case. The light from two candles was concentrated on his broad forehead and bold, high-bridged nose. His dark blue eyes looked black. Pain and gloom were stamped on his face, and a great loneliness, not only the loneliness of the strong soul and of the leader and commander, but of the man for the time being entirely out of touch with life.

CHAPTER II.

WHITE WOMAN!

CAMERON and Grant made it up over their excellent dinner. In honor of the former's official return to health and the latter's elephant, they split a bottle of Bollinger to wash down the partridges and the tinned beans and the grilled scones of *matamma*—native flour.

Cameron made a handsome apology and all was peace. They smoked their pipes while the fires outside blazed and the *safari* toasted its elephant flesh stuck on bits of stick. The louder drum beating and an occasional sound of voices singing in the distance announced that the natives of the village were indulging in music and dancing, having received their share of elephant flesh in exchange for flour, chickens' eggs, and services rendered in carrying messages to and from the river.

The doctor kept to his tent, demanding only meat broth, and the two other men were not sorry.

"Fact is, Bobbie," said Cameron, "you ought to have kicked me. That blasted fever took a lot out of me, and I can't help thinking of Mrs. Lacey all the time."

"Morbid," interjected Grant.

"I know. You were against bringing him, weren't you?"

"I was. I thought him too young. And, besides, I agree with what you used to say that the fewer white men in a hunting party the better."

"It's true enough. They always get on one another's nerves."

"There's no need for me to come to Lake Rudolf."

"Don't be a fool, Bobbie. You're different. I never meant you. If I lost my

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temper just now, put it down to malaria and worry about poor Don. You must come to Lake Rudolf.

"I simply couldn't be alone with Merridew. And it's quite true he'll have to be watched, if he takes to drink. We know what it means with natives. I don't pretend I like the chap any too much, but, as you say, he will be useful—in fact, indispensable when we settle down to work on the excavations. And he's all right on *safari* and most handy with his gun.

"Let's hope the whisky incident was only a lapse. I dare say he was blue, poor devil, with me under the weather, and I don't suppose his own life bears much thinking about, with a mad wife at home."

Suddenly the camp became alive with movement, chattering, whispering, running to and fro. From their various tents the boys all converged to some point at the back of the clearing. The two men looked at each other, arose and went out. One never knows what is going to happen in Africa.

Tishi, the head gun bearer, and virtually headman of the *safari*, came running toward them.

"White woman, Bwana!" he cried. "White woman with boys coming through the forest!"

The two men looked at each other again with uplifted eyebrows.

A white woman!

Now, with the advancing march of civilization in Africa, white women quite often passed up and down the White Nile, either to or from the Sudan, accompanying their male folk on business, and sometimes purely for pleasure. But in this particular bit of country a white woman would hardly penetrate except for sport.

"D'you suppose it's Mrs. Jakes, Paul?" asked Grant.

"I hope to God it isn't," replied Cameron fervently.

Mrs. Jakes was a hunter of big game, a widow of fifty, possessed of great wealth, intrepid, hard as nails, a fine shot, living only for sport, a monomaniac, in short. In between her expeditions she was the terror of the hotels in Mombasa, Cape Town, Johannesburg, or Durban.

A male hunter there was her prey; she marked him down and pursued him as she pursued elephant and buffalo and lion. And the male hunter fled her bombast and her garrulousness as he would flee the plague.

Beyond the fencing and the blazing fires could be seen fainter flames in the dense blackness, the lights of torches. Cameron and Grant went forward quickly.

One of the sudden dramas of Africa was enacted. Around the two men gathered some forty-five porters, black, shining, with interested, gleaming eyes and flashing white teeth.

At the opening in the fence stood the two red-smeared Congolese, holding their spears aloft. Gun bearers, kitchen staff, personal servants, all made one huddled mass of oiled humanity, swollen with their orgy of elephant meat.

And, advancing toward them, with five boys behind her, holding torches that were fast burning down, came a person who looked very small, a woman in khaki jacket and short skirt and leggings, but without a hat on, and with her hands pressed against her forehead, as if in pain.

The two white men ran forward and reached her side before she had cleared the last of the giant mahogany trees.

"It's not Mrs. Jakes," whispered Grant.

The woman stopped and looked up into their two faces, the mosquito-devoured one and the strong, petulant, bearded one. Behind them the fires burned fiercely; her own face was made expressionless by the glare, showing only two eyes, a nose, a mouth, and a cloud of red hair.

"Good evening," said Grant, rather ridiculously, in his tight-sounding voice.

"I expect you have lost your way," put in Cameron, who had caught the lost look in the woman's face. "I am glad you saw our fires."

"Yes, I saw your fires," the woman said. Then she gave vent to a sudden uncontrolable sob.

Cameron made a gesture of command, and all the natives dispersed. The chatter ceased as if by magic. The woman swayed from side to side. In a few moments they had guided her into the *banda* and put her into a chair.

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She sat there, her shoulders shaking in silent convulsion, tears streaming down her face.

The two men waited, helpless and ill at ease.

"Please don't be distressed," said Cameron at last. "You are quite safe."

She looked up, trying to smile.

"Do forgive me," she said. "I am so silly. But I'm so tired and I haven't had any food for ages, and I've had a perfectly horrid time." Suddenly she burst into sobs again, up and down the scale of hysteria; and then, with a mighty effort, ended up with a laugh.

"I'm not really such an idiot as I seem," she said. Her voice and manner proclaimed her self-reliant; there was poise in the way she held her head, capability in her bare, brown hands. She was quite young, a little past girlhood.

At first sight she looked plain. Her face was pale and freckled; her eyes were many-colored—gray, blue, green, brown—one hardly knew which predominated. Her hair was not red, but a beautiful rich chestnut. It was wrapped round her head in plaits, and escaped under them in a ruddy cloud. Her clothing was very travel-stained; her skirt held together with safety pins in several places; the sole and upper of one thick shooting boot were on the point of parting company. She was emaciated, and obviously worn out with fatigue to the point of collapse.

Grant called out to the group of natives peering curiously into the *banda* to go away and send the cook. He ordered a tin of soup to be opened and went himself to fetch a pint of champagne, telling the cook's mate on his way from the stores' tent to feed the white lady's boys.

The young woman revived after sipping a glass of wine and eating a biscuit. The two men introduced themselves, but refrained from questioning her as to what she was doing alone in the forest at night with only five boys, until the soup came and she had finished it and eaten a *matamma* scone. Then they heard her story.

Her name was Claudia Scott. She had lived in Africa most of her life—on a Rhodesian farm in her youth, and accompanying her father on his travels all over the Continent. He was dead now. His name was Dr. Norland Scott; he had been a clergyman and a doctor of divinity, and had taken up mission work later on in life.

At this Cameron exclaimed:

"You are the daughter of Dr. Norland Scott—the naturalist! You are to be envied. He must have been a wonderful character. His books fascinate me. Never can there have been a man who knew Africa so well—the birds and beasts and insects and plants, and the natives too."

Claudia smiled gratefully and went on with her story.

She had an only brother, a doctor, who had taken up the study of tropical medicine, particularly in relation to a cure for sleeping sickness. She herself was a qualified nurse, and she had also taken a course last year at the Institute attached to Liverpool University.

They had come out to Africa together in November last, and had gone into the interior of the Congo for her brother to carry out his researches. They had had many adventures, and her brother had done valuable work; then, a month ago, on their way back to the Nile and homeward, via Mombasa, Vincent had caught black-water fever and died.

They were four days' march from a settlement of the White Fathers of the Uganda border, and they managed to get him there just before the end. The White Fathers buried him in their tiny cemetery. It was his wish.

She then continued her journey. A few days later the headman of her *safari,* a middle-aged Masai whom they had known for years, also died of the terrible fever, and the boys buried him in the bush. The next morning she found that most of the porters had deserted her, taking a great many of the stores.

There was nothing to do but push on with the remainder of the porters. They lost their way and got into the Legworo country, where the natives were hostile and known still to be cannibals. They had a terrible time, as the boys who deserted had taken all the salt and wire necklaces

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and chains, which were the favorite objects of barter.

They were set upon once by a party of warriors with poisoned arrows, and only escaped by a miracle and the determined shooting of one of the boys who carried her brother's gun. They lost two boys, who were killed outright by the poisoned arrows and undoubtedly made their way into the cannibals' stewpot. This so upset her that she became half delirious, and remembered nothing for the next few days.

When they came to the river, a hostile party following them with shouts and curses and dreadful threats, they managed to hide at the edge of the swamp, and after two days two Swahilis came along in a canoe and agreed to take them across in exchange for the rest of the stores. Nearly dead with exhaustion, Claudia slept the clock round in a public rest-house near Bora, and woke to find that the rest of the boys had disappeared.

There was no sign of a European. The natives seemed friendly, quiet, and industrious, and gave her flour and a chicken or two and some dried beans in exchange for her wrist watch.

She managed to procure five porters to take her to Wadelai, meaning to wait there for a steamer to Lake Albert, and was almost sure that she would come across a white man within a few days.

These boys appeared loyal, and their forced marches were carried out regularly, but either they missed the road by accident or purposely, for they did not reach Wadelai, and she herself, being in a semi-comatose state from fatigue and hunger, did not notice that they were leading her into the forest.

When she realized her position, she questioned them, but they could give her no rational answer. They became weak themselves for lack of food; their wits seemed to desert them; they ate roots from the forest that made them very ill; and for the last few days she had felt very insecure and was almost certain that they had been wandering about in circles, cutting their way with frightful difficulty through the impenetrable bush.

"When I saw your fires," she said, "I had already made up my mind I should not live to see a white face again."

The dour, dry Bobbie was much louder in congratulating her on her pluck than his friend, which was strange, because Cameron possessed the "gift of the gab" in a far greater degree. Almost the only thing he said was:

"You speak the language, Miss Scott, I suppose?"

"Yes. Swahili," she answered, "and Arabic and Kaffir."

And then, even as she spoke, the two men saw that her lids were dropping over her eyes in sleep.

It was Grant who led her into Cameron's tent at the back of the *banda*, and collected his friend's primitive toilet appliances and told her not to worry about anything, but just to lie down and go to sleep.

She obeyed him like a child, and sank on to the camp bed fully dressed, and he pulled the blankets over her and then the waterproof sheet, and pulled down the mosquito net and stole out to fetch two boys to keep guard over the entrance of the *banda*.

Cameron, meanwhile, had interviewed Miss Scott's porters and treated them to much strong language, contumely and scorn. But, as he confided to Grant when the two men were busy arranging themselves in the latter's tent for the night, making two bodies occupy one space, as it were, he did not think the boys had any evil designs.

They were from Nakole's village, some fifty miles down the river, and he thought their behavior was due to lack of food and having poisoned themselves with the roots they had eaten in the forest.

"She fell on your bed in a dead sleep, Paul," Grant informed him. "Queer kind of a girl. Not pretty, do you think?"

"I didn't notice. She must be a marvel of pluck."

"Rather plain, as a matter of fact. Nice voice, though. As you say, any amount of pluck. One of these independent modern females, evidently. And yet there's something about her. Don't you think so, Paul?"

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Cameron was lighting his pipe. "I don't know what you mean, Bobbie," he said after the first deep pull at it.

"Neither do I, Paul," replied Grant with his dry laugh. "But there is something about her, all the same. Of course, you never look at women."

"I didn't know you were exactly a ladies' man yourself," said Cameron grumpily.

Grant laughed again, and they prepared themselves for sleep.

Soon the camp was wrapped in silence. Above were innumerable brilliant stars, just a jeweler's showcase of them, where the forest had been cleared by early travelers many years ago. The distant drum-beating continued; the village was indulging in an orgy of music and dancing. Nearer at hand the low growls of prowling beasts were heard every now and then.

CHAPTER III.

NOT A CLINGING VINE.

CAMERON was out of the tent just after what should have been the dawn, but only to be met by a heavy blanket of steaming mist, like a poisonous Turkish bath, and no chance of the sun's rays being able to struggle through. There had been a drenching downpour since two o'clock in the morning.

To his intense astonishment he found Miss Scott sitting on an old tree trunk surrounded by a crowd of shining-faced, eager-eyed porters of his *safari,* recounting her adventures to them. Her clear voice used all the graduations of the native tongue as if born to it.

She pointed her narratives with various illustrations of the folly and wickedness of the boys in deserting and betraying their white employers who had always shown themselves their friends.

The natives listened spellbound, and looked intensely shame-faced when she ended up with some sentences of scathing irony. The African races, with very few exceptions, are far more susceptible to sarcasm than to the most violent physical punishment.

Cameron was hugely tickled at the feminine ingenuity that used her own experiences to warn his *safari* against doing likewise.

He wondered whether she had seen her own boys and what she had said to them. It appeared she had, and found them so sick and sorry for themselves, having partaken too freely of the elephant flesh of their hosts on very empty stomachs, that she could not administer the verbal castigation that they deserved.

Now that she was rested and had made herself as tidy as circumstances permitted, her air of quiet efficiency was more pronounced. But there was nothing unwomanly about it. She did not give the impression of seeking adventures, or of rejoicing in danger, but just of being ready for any emergency.

Cameron observed her face, as the natives dispersed and left them alone together. Her hazel eyes were deep set under straight brows, inquiring eyes, looking out, it seemed to him, for somebody that needed help. Yes, that was the keynote of her face, he felt sure—helpfulness.

Nose and chin were straight in line; the mouth between them was fairly large, the lips folded lightly in a way suggesting repose. When she smiled in answer to his "Good morning," her face lit up with such frank sweetness that it was like the sun coming out.

He found it difficult to agree with Grant that she was not pretty, yet by all the accepted canons of beauty she certainly was not. She held herself well, and her head was just rightly set on a slim neck. She was tall for a woman, for she nearly reached Cameron's shoulder, and he was a big man.

"Good morning, Mr. Cameron," she said. Her cool out-door voice was as refreshing as an upland breeze in this steaming swamp of Africa. "I'm going to be a nuisance to you, I promise.

"That I am sure you are not, Miss Scott," he said, with a smile matching hers in frankness. He had removed his beard that morning, and Claudia would hardly have known him. She saw the same big, splendidly proportioned fair man, but years younger.

His bronzed face was powerful rather

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than handsome. The bold nose and square chin showed naked strength. The reserved and close-set mouth had a hint of tenderness in its corners, the forehead was that of an idealist; the dark blue eyes were those of a boy.

There was no trace of yesterday's ill-humor. The advent of a stranger woman had broken the nervous tension that had set him and Grant spitting at each other like two spiteful cats.

"Of course," he went on, "we shan't think of moving until you are thoroughly rested and we have seen you safely as far as Wadelai. It will take us two or three days to get ready anyhow."

"You are going home, I suppose?"

"No," he answered, "we are not. We are off on a rather long trek across country to Lake Rudolf, or, rather near Lake Rudolf."

"Oh!" She gave a startled exclamation. "You are going to Lake Rudolf?"

"Do you know the country?"

"Yes. It's funny, isn't it? I was thinking of going there myself."

"Then you are not going home?"

"I was if my brother had—been with me. But, you see, we were all alone—my mother has been dead for years, and my father, too. I have nobody now." She paused for a moment.

She made no extravagant protestations of grief, but Cameron saw in her eyes that the wound would take many years to heal, perhaps never would completely heal in this world. It was clear to him that she had left what was dearest to her on earth lying in the little cemetery of the White Fathers in the Congo.

"Where does Lake Rudolf come in?" he asked quietly.

"Why, I was there—near the south-eastern shore—before I went to England to join my brother in the spring of last year. I stayed with friends—missionaries who have started a hospital near Titinti."

It was Cameron's turn to exclaim:

"Titinti! Why, that is not very far from Mount Kulol, the volcano! Are your missionary friends the Donalds?"

"Yes. Do you know them? How extraordinary!"

"It is rather remarkable. We are going to camp not very far from there. My friend and I are going to put in some months excavating. Did you hear about some remains of a very ancient civilization that has been found?"

"Yes. But nobody was working there at the time."

"Nobody has taken it up seriously yet. We are awfully keen. And there is excellent shooting in the neighborhood, so we are looking forward to a happy time. And you are thinking of going there, too, Miss Scott?"

"Yes. The Donalds wanted help badly at the time and I expect they do still. And I know something about native diseases, and they are such nice, kind people, and I felt I should be of a little use in the world."

"When are you going?"

"Well, after all that has happened now, I suppose I shall have to get to Kampala somehow and buy stores, and I suppose my nearest way is to go over into Kenya and take the train as far as I can, and then get a *safari* together and do the rest of the journey on a horse or in a *machila*." (A hammock carried by four native boys.)

Cameron spoke on an impulse that he did not himself understand.

"Would you accept our escort, Miss Scott? We shall be only too glad, and it probably won't take you any longer. We have plenty of stores and our *safari* is quite big enough, so that you can pay off your boys, or bring them with you, just as you like."

She smiled and again the man was reminded of an April day on a Yorkshire moor.

"It's most awfully good of you, and if I shan't be in the way, I should love it. In fact, it's like Providence."

He liked the way she accepted, with the *camaraderie* of the hardened traveler.

"I've got absolutely nothing left but a case of clothes and my personal kit," she added. "But if you can feed me, I shall be all right. I've plenty of money with me, and can pay my way.

"I'll keep these boys, if they'll come, because I mustn't take any of your boys from you, and I can do my day's march on foot

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if necessary. I can promise you that. I never seemed to be in Vincent's way." There was great pathos in the hazel eyes again, and Cameron seemed to feel her loneliness.

"You must be very sad, Miss Scott," he said. "I can understand a little. We are in trouble, too." In a few simple words he told her the story of Don Lacey's death.

"Oh, how dreadful! Poor boy! And his mother—poor, poor woman!" The few low words spread a boundless sympathy. "You must be sad, too. We must help each other."

He found himself holding her hand, feeling a little comforted by a strong and patient gentleness such as he had never come across in a woman or man before.

What was Bobbie's expression? There was something about her. There was. Something very difficult to put into words.

Just then Grant came out to them from the stores' tent, where he had been superintending the packing. Cameron told him about Miss Scott's plans, and the little Scotchman looked distinctly pleased. He also had shaved—an excruciating performance it must have been, on account of the mosquito bites—and generally furbished himself up.

He announced that Dr. Merridew declared himself a little better, but would stay in bed that day in order to be ready to start off to-morrow. At the same moment breakfast was announced, and they repaired to the *banda*.

While they discussed the meal, which included a tin of sardines in honor of Miss Scott, Tishi, the head gunbearer, came in. He was closely followed by a native clad in a loincloth and a necklace of empty cartridge cases, with a funny little tuft of hair like a miniature top hat on the crown of his head.

The native was very much out of breath, and gasped out, "*Jambo, bwana!*" ("Good day, master!") as he pulled a letter out of a dirty piece of cloth and handed it to Cameron.

"A runner from the river," said Cameron, as he looked at the handwriting. "He was given this at Wadelai when the steamer stopped. Wonder who it can be from?"

The man was dismissed, and Cameron read the letter, frowning as he went on. Then he tossed it to Grant, exclaiming: "I don't know whether I like this or not!"

Grant read the short epistle aloud at a nod from his friend.

"The House on the Hill, Entebbe.

"DEAR CAMERON:

"You are reported to be in the vicinity of Wadelai. I hope this will reach you. I hear you are going to excavate near Titinti. As you know, I am deeply interested in these magnificent and mysterious remains. I want to join forces with you. I have just arrived from home, and have brought tools, equipment, a whole camping outfit, everything we can possibly want.

"I want to see you. Can you come to Entebbe for a few days? I am sending a car to Butiaba on the chance. You could get there from Wadelai in two or three days, they tell me. Owing to the rains, the road is bad, so that you must reckon two days from Butiaba here.

"I do hope you will allow me to come with you. I want you to understand that I place myself entirely under your orders. You are the leader of the expedition. I only want to help. Everything I have is at your disposal. I very much hope to see you within a few days.

"Most sincerely,

"CARL PLOEREL."

"What do you think of that?" asked Grant sarcastically.

"Yes, Miss Scott, what do you think of that?" Cameron asked.

"Who is the writer?"

"Don't you know Sir Carl Ploerel, not even by name?"

She shook her head.

"Then more than ever I should like to know what you think of the letter."

"Well," she said slowly, "it seems a strange letter. Such a mixture. He says he only wants to help and he begs you to allow him to go with you. And yet he writes like a king and practically commands you to go to Entebbe to see him. I am sure he expects you to go."

Both men laughed.

"You have hit him off exactly, Miss Scott!" said Grant.

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"Is he a well-known man?"

"More a man of mystery than well known," Cameron replied. "He is an old man and reputed to be a millionaire. He lived in India for many years. From there he came to Africa, and he has now adopted the country.

"He certainly has that curious mixture of arrogance and humility that you describe. He has given huge sums to various scientific institutions and hospitals in the Cape, and now they credit him with wanting to develop Uganda."

"Why is he interested in these remains?" Claudia asked.

"Well, he has a right to be," said Cameron, a trifle ruefully. "He discovered them, you see. Stumbled on them by accident on one of his treks. He had only left a week before I got there to prospect. Then the matter was dropped because I went home, and when I came back I had other engagements.

"And now Ploerel has evidently heard that we are going to start work. You know how a whisper is heard from one end of Africa to the other, Miss Scott."

"Are you going to let him join you, Mr. Cameron?" There was interest in her voice.

"I don't want to," Cameron answered.

"Don't be an ass, Paul!" Grant put in.

"We'd be much happier on our own, Bobbie. Of course, we can't prevent him coming if he wishes to, but why shouldn't we work independently?"

"My good fellow, you and I are poor men," said Grant in his dogmatic way. "You want to do as much as you can, don't you? With Ploerel's resources we can do a hundred times the work. We've to make the most of our time, haven't we? Such a short time at the best, not being able to hang about Africa for the rest of our lives. And the old bird can't hurt us; indeed, his magnificence may come in useful now and then."

Cameron was impressed by Grant's common sense, but he repeated doubtfully: "I'd ever so much rather be on our own."

"Go and see Ploerel, Paul," counseled Grant. "There are several things we really need that you can get at Kampala. You needn't be away more than twelve days."

It was thrashed out by the two men over their pipes after breakfast, and in a couple of hours everything was settled. Claudia was to stay under Grant's and Merridew's care until Cameron returned. She was quite willing.

Nobody even suggested that a woman companion would be advisable. It would have seemed an insult to the girl. She had just dropped into the camp, not as if she were another man at all, but as if there were a place vacant for her and she exactly fitted it.

About eleven o'clock Cameron started off on the trek to the river, about thirty-six hours, if the swamps were no worse than when Grant came back. He took only three boys and his personal servant. He did not expect to catch the return steamer to Butiaba on Lake Albert, and would have to get a canoe, which meant two or perhaps three days in the swollen state of the river. The little *safari* was traveling as light as possible, taking, besides the smallest quantity of food, only a little salt, a roll of *merikani* (calico sheeting), and a few tins of condensed milk—those commodities, the salt especially, being the open sesame to the services of the natives even in these enlightened days.

Grant and Claudia walked a little way along the forest track with him. When he asked Claudia if there was anything she particularly wanted from Kampala, she answered readily:

"A pair of boots, please, number six, and please have them nailed, and a double terai hat. The boys stole my dear old friend that I'd worn for five years."

He shook hands with her at last.

"Good-by and good luck," she said. "I shall look forward to your coming back." And, for no reason, she suddenly flushed and looked away into the depths of the forest.

"And I shall look forward very much to coming back," he answered in a low voice.

There was a moment's awkwardness, broken by Grant's dry voice:

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"Well, if you don't get off now, old man, you'll never get there—much less come back."

CHAPTER IV.

THE COUNTERFEIT OF LOVE.

LESS than a week's journey by road, canoe, and motor car, and what a different world Paul Cameron found himself in as the sun went down when he alighted below the veranda steps of Sir Carl Ploerel's wonderful bungalow on the wooded hillside at Entebbe, overlooking the sparkling waters of Lake Victoria Nyanza, with its sandy bays and lovely green islands and its high shores fading into pearly mists! Who would believe that this delightful township had been cut out of impenetrable forest?

Far more magical than Monte Carlo, far more suggestive than Naples, this group of villas set high on the shores of the huge inland sea as large as Scotland. Roses everywhere, climbing the great forest trees left in the gardens. English flowers rioting, transmuted into something miraculous by the genial climate.

It was as if a fairy wand had been waved and transformed the world to Cameron's eyes, weary of swamps and mists and the black-green damp, silent forest, and the everlasting drip and ooze of water and slime.

A fairy wand indeed when, as his feet touched the floor of the veranda, carpeted with Oriental rugs, a bland English butler in spotless white came forward with a respectful greeting.

"Mr. Cameron, sir? Sir Carl begs you to excuse him until dinner time. He has been rather poorly—nothing serious, sir, only he got a touch of the sun at Nairobi the other day, and he is to keep quiet for a few days. May I show you your rooms, sir, or would you like a peg first?"

"No, thanks—a bath," said Cameron, with his frank, infectious smile.

What a wallow—what a priceless wallow in that great tub of hot water, its clearness clouded deliciously by a bottle of Eau de Cologne that the valet had considerately poured into it! Up to his neck in the hot water! What did it matter to Cameron that it took a dozen boys to pump the water up into that bungalow? If the whole native population of Uganda had been thus employed he wouldn't have turned a hair.

The bath over, the valet asked him what he would like served in his rooms. It was then six o'clock. Dinner was at nine. Cameron ordered tea and buttered toast.

More wallowing! The fleshpots of Egypt were good.

He sat outside, gazing out on the lake, now a strange dense green, as seen from his electrically illumined balcony, with the lights from native boats dancing like fireflies upon its immeasurable bosom. Then he got himself into a dress suit, not the worse for wear but for being folded up for months in a tin lined case, and about half past eight he went down the little hall staircase, across the big whitewashed hall, hung with old Eastern rugs and trophies of sport and strange native weapons, into the veranda.

A broad room this, with armchairs, lounges, and tables, many cushions, electric lights and fans, and a cage of mosquito netting so fine that one didn't notice it. There were newspapers on the tables—South African, Indian—and illustrated periodicals and magazines from home. Cameron sat down and picked up a copy of the *Field*, not so very ancient.

He took a cigarette from an enamel box, lit it, and stretched his legs with a sigh of sheer content.

A voice sounded behind him.

"Hullo, Paul!"

He started to his feet as if a mine had exploded under him.

The voice was a woman's, a troubling voice, sweet but with a ping in it—a voice of immense following power, a voice that, if a man loved it, would keep him a slave to his end; but if he did not love it, might drive him mad.

"Mary!" he exclaimed.

It was a woman, slight and straight, with a skin of chocolate and cream, a wonderful little head of short, black, wavy hair, with copper threads in it, an exquisite tip-tilted

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nose, full scarlet lips, and eyes of great size, dark, dark brown with red lights in them.

A woman of the cities, exuding luxury in her little frock of grayish yellow lace, with the sheen of silver under it, with long, slender feet shod in oyster satin, with great pearls lying iridescent on her thin, dark chest.

A woman fragrant with a faint, hot, subtle perfume that Cameron remembered well, a woman who had once played havoc with his life, a woman he had for seven years done his very best to forget.

"You are not pleased to see me, Paul?" she asked.

"Of course—I am. But—how do you come here?"

She laughed with a little toss of her head and a flicker of her eyelids.

"I was staying at Nairobi with the governor, Paul, and Sir Carl passed in his kingly way. I said I'd like to see Entebbe, and he said come along. His sister is with him—dear old soul! Quite correct! So here I am. Sir Carl told me he expected you. And—but aren't you glad?"

"Of course, I am," repeated Cameron with a jerk in his voice. "But it's so—unexpected."

"Sit down, Paul," said Lady Stour. She placed herself on a *chaise longue* beside him, drawing up her feet, looking at him with a radiant smile. She was as splendid in her rich coloring as a tropical bird. "I've got such a lot to say I don't know where to begin. Paul, did you know Lionel was dead?"

Cameron started.

"No. I had no idea. I haven't been home for a long time now."

"Yes, Lionel is dead." Her voice was low; there was no sting in it. It caressed him, like the gossamer touch of a gorgeous insect's wing. "Paul, I am free."

The man said nothing. His mind went back seven years. He was twenty-eight, this woman, Mary, Marchioness of Stour, about the same age. He was back from an Assam tea plantation; he had met her in India, and in England he fell into her arms. He lived for her, she for him. Her elderly husband was never seen.

The crisis came—an ugly scandal, a thousand tongues wagging, and not without something to wag about. He all eagerness to make amends, to do what could be done. So much under her spell that he had no separate life.

The husband standing in the path, refusing to take legal proceedings. The lovers parted with cruel, vindictive, inexorable power. Nothing to be done.

Cameron and Mary Stour's names linked together, but nothing to be done. Only to hear the gossip, to turn with helpless nausea from the paragraphs in the papers. Nothing to be done. Mary Stour tied to her elderly husband; Paul Cameron, raging, going back into the wilds.

And now Stour was dead and Mary was free.

From the shore below came the song of a native boatman: "O—ha—ah! O—ah—ah! O Zanzibar!" A strange, crooning melody. There was consternation in Cameron's soul. The steaming smell of the camp was in his nostrils; in his mind was the image of Claudia Scott, her gentle, steadfast, patient hazel eyes.

Mary Stour laid her hand on his; he had to return her brown-red gaze, so warm, so devouring.

Some of Kipling's words ran through his brain:

> The sin that ye do by two and two
> Ye must pay for one by one—

His time had come to pay.

The red-brown eyes glowed in the dimly lit veranda.

"Paul, Lionel has been dead six months. I am free."

Free!

Mary Stour was free. Her husband had been dead these last six months, and Cameron had not known it.

Freedom! The word so fine, so splendid, like a great breath of joy bursting from an imprisoned soul. Freedom—at last!

What did it mean? That Mary was no longer tied to that bald-headed, coldly smiling satyr, the Marquess of Stour, that there was no longer any obstacle to their love, that they could marry and prove to the world the greatness and the depth and the

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immortality of that passion which the cynicism of society and the inhuman vengefulness of Stour had bespattered so thickly with mud.

Seven years! A long time—seven years. Time enough to change a man, to turn him from a social being at home in ballrooms and on race courses into a wanderer, a passionate lover of solitude and of the wild places of the earth.

But Cameron had been the passionate lover of this woman, and now she was free.

"Oh, Paul," she whispered, "say you are glad!"

"Of course, I am glad."

"It has been hell for me. You can't think. Lionel was the devil, I believe. He knew, you see—he *knew* that I never forgot you, that I thought of you day and night. It was bad enough in his cold moods. But when he made love to me—oh!"

She gave a cry of horror and twisted her long-fingered, slender hands. "I don't know how I've lived through it, Paul. I couldn't have done it but for the glimpses I've had of you—such a few short hours in all these dreadful years. Do you remember the last time, when we met in Copenhagen by chance? The dinner at the little restaurant near the quay, and the walk afterward? Miles and miles we walked, and it was so peaceful and glorious, with the water dancing in the moonlight, and the warships in the harbor, and the fishing fleet out at sea."

"I remember," said Cameron. He could not understand himself. All that she said he had felt, too, during those days, the wild joy in their rare meetings, the fury and revolt against her husband, the loneliness, the longing for her lovely presence.

And yet, as he looked at her exquisite face, so alluring, piquant and yet mysterious at the same time, so rich, so warm, so vital, it almost seemed to him that it was a stranger who was making these protestations of love to him, and he was ashamed.

"Paul—" She slipped her hand through his arm. "When Lionel was dying—it was awful! He wouldn't let me leave him. His last words to me were: 'I wonder if you will get Cameron to marry you, Mary!' And he smiled in that hideous way he had that seemed to turn you into ice.

"And every day he mentioned you in some way or other, and said I must have been a fool if I thought he would divorce me. Oh!" And the sweet voice sank to a low note of passionate meaning. "Paul, I feel like a poor prisoner set free after years of irksome bondage. Don't worry if I seem rather mad."

"Why didn't you write to me at once?" the man asked.

"I hadn't the slightest idea where you were. I thought you must hear of Lionel's death as soon as you came to some civilized place. I had heard you were somewhere in Africa.

"Then Florence Eastman asked me on a visit to Nairobi, and I felt it would bring me nearer to you, so I came. It was something to be on the same continent, Paul. And, oh, now I can hardly breathe for happiness! I always knew our love was eternal, that it could only grow—and grow."

Their eternal love! Yes—their eternal love. Cameron found himself repeating the words inwardly. Of course, it was eternal, or else it was not love.

And then he understood himself, and he looked at the radiant face, glowing like some tropical flower in the dimly lit balcony, with fear in his heart.

His love for Mary Stour was dead. It had never been love, then. It was not eternal. At any rate, he did not love her any more; he did not want to marry her now that she was free.

He sat beside her, unmoved, alluring, intoxicating though she was, or, at least, moved only to self-scorn. He had done her the greatest wrong of all, then, without knowing it.

He had believed her to be the one love of his life. He had lived for her, condemned by the world, but glorying in his defiance of its laws.

But now he knew it had all been a lie, a mirage, such as he had seen in the Sahara, tall ships in full sail on a rippling sea. He had never loved Mary. He could not have loved her, since love was eternal and his love was dead.

He was no better than the trifling, profitless creature, the professional carpet knight who loves and rides away.

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That he had not known, made no difference. He ought to have known it. And it did not bind him any less firmly to Mary Stour, rather more firmly, in fact. Bound in honor.

Good-by to life—life that was worth while. Good-by to the great forests, to the long marches and the nights in bivouac.

Good-by to the camp fires and the chattering natives and the days spent in pursuit of the elephant and buffalo and the great cats. Good-by to the bush and the jungle, to danger and excitement and blessed fatigue. Good-by to many a friendship such as only travelers know.

Mary Stour was a woman of luxury and soft living, a woman who shrieked at the sight of a mouse and lisped for protection in baby talk if she had to ford a shallow stream on stepping stones.

And again the picture of Claudia Scott in her tattered and stained khaki obtruded itself, he knew not why. And the frank outdoor voice and the sudden, sweet smile, in violent contrast with the strange seduction, both soft and hard, and the subtle fragrance of the black-haired, brown-skinned, red-eyed woman by his side.

That perfume of Mary's, how it brought things back—hot, airless, feverish things like Riviera restaurants and ballrooms and crowds in evening dress and rich food and strong wine. He had loved the scent of it—no, he was wrong, he could not have loved it since it nauseated him now.

He had been just a fool, one of the millions who picked up a handful of dross and thought it was gold.

Only he was to blame. Only he. The woman loved him still.

Her voice, her eyes, her whole exquisite being told him so. She was true. She was faithful. So she must be served.

"Paul," whispered the sweet voice, "am I going to get you to marry me, as Lionel put it?"

"Of course," he answered. "How can you ask such a question? We ought to have been married years ago."

"Oh, Paul, dear, dear Paul! This is heaven—to hear you say it. It makes up for everything." Then, lower still: "Beloved of my heart, I adore you."

The moment had come. She was so very close to him. Her little head all but leaned on his shoulder; he could feel her breath on his cheek. It was so very obvious—what she wanted.

Cameron turned to her, took her in his arms and kissed her.

Surely, surely she must know! It was no lover's kiss. He could not make it like one, not to save his life. It was grave and gentle; it expressed what he felt—a huge regret and a tremendous feeling of self-abasement.

Her lips burned him; her eyes shone for a moment wild and red; then she buried her face on his shoulder with an inarticulate, passion-ridden cry. He felt her trembling.

Then, warned by a sudden strong illumination in the room behind, he put her away from him, and a woman's voice was heard—Miss Ploerel addressing the butler.

Cameron and Mary Stour rose, the woman transformed, vivacious, sure of herself, pointing with a malicious smile to the man's black coat smeared with the brownish powder that she used to enhance her strange chocolate and cream complexion.

Miss Ploerel, a little old woman with hunched shoulders and a very clever face of a decided cast, apologized for her brother, who was not well enough to come to dinner, after all. He was certain to be all right in the morning and looked forward greatly to seeing Mr. Cameron.

She was a perfect hostess. Cameron admired her sympathetic voice, and, as dinner proceeded, her clear mind and her beautiful use of the English language. She was highly educated, obviously widely read, and had traveled all over the world.

Her gray-streaked black hair hung in bunches of ringlets over her ears. Her black eyes were as bright as the many splendid diamonds she wore on her fingers and around her throat. She was dressed in white lace, and an ermine cape hung over the back of her chair.

She treated Lady Stour as if she were a child, indulging her, telling her what to eat, promising her a trip on the lake in Sir Carl's motor launch.

Cameron himself could hardly believe that Mary was his own age—a woman of

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thirty-five. She had kept amazingly young, and responded to Miss Ploerel's treatment like a purring kitten.

He had no opportunity of being alone with her again before bedtime—to his unspeakable relief.

The next morning he had a chat with Sir Carl in his study. There was little to be seen of the man of mystery and millions. He was wrapped in blankets, and a fur-lined overcoat hung over his shoulders.

Round his head was a large white woolen muffler; his face was equally white, but for two black eyes and a strip of stark black mustache. He did not look old or young, rather like a mummy without wrinkles.

His mouth had weak lines, but his nose was a beak and the cheekbones and forehead were strongly modeled.

He had a small but very pleasant voice and a perfectly charming manner.

And he proceeded to lay siege to Cameron's prejudices against a joint campaign on the ruins near Lake Rudolf, and ultimately succeeded.

A series of photographs of a building that might have been a temple decided the issue. Sir Carl had had a man there taking photographs of some of the buried sites, and the man had accidentally stumbled on this fabric of stones so ancient that they did not seem to belong to any time as yet known to humanity. Cameron examined the pictures, his hands trembling. After that he could not help welcoming Sir Carl's help.

"It will be the find of all time," he said. "Nineveh—Mycene—it will put them both in the shade."

"Go slow, go slow, young man," chuckled the old man. "But I think we will make the world sit up."

They made plans elaborate and concise, and agreed to meet on the site of the excavations in about six weeks' time. It would take Cameron's *safari* all that time to get there, with Miss Scott as a passenger, too.

"I shall bring my secretary, Mark Glamorgan, two or three white servants, and the native *safari*," Sir Carl said. "We shall be over a hundred souls in all. But I have everything prepared. There is nothing for you to do but establish your own camp. You have a lady with you, you say?"

"Yes, but she is going to stay at the mission at Titinti with the Donalds."

"That's right. We don't want any women, Cameron. They could only be in the way. My sister is going to stay for some time in Zanzibar. She simply adores the climate.

"Well, let's hope for lots of luck! And don't forget—you are the leader. Everything you wish I will do. As I said in my letter, everything I have is at your disposal. I don't care what money it costs.

"It's vulgar to talk about money, I know, but you'll understand. You're such an understanding chap, Cameron. And I'm fearfully obliged to you for letting me come, I think it's really frightfully decent of you. And I'm simply disgusted with myself for being such a croak. But you'll stay a few days, won't you?"

Cameron said he couldn't, as he had to get back to start on the trek at once. He had that morning taken Donald Lacey's kit to the quay and placed it on board the steamer to be taken to Kisumu and thence by rail to Mombasa and home. He had to buy certain stores in Kampala on his way back.

Sir Carl was excited about the trip in a queer, almost womanish way. For an old man he had tremendous energy.

The rest of the day was spent on the water, and Miss Ploerel and Lady Stour and Cameron picnicked in a lovely sandy cove, above which the great forest and all the undergrowth had been cut away on account of the dreaded sleeping sickness, which had depopulated the islands and shores of the lake.

The next morning early Cameron set off on the return journey.

Mary Stour was on the veranda as he and his boys took their places in Sir Carl's two motor cars.

She looked at him shyly, girlishly, such a slim, young, dark creature in her tussore frock.

"Paul, when shall we meet again?" she asked.

"What are you going to do?" he replied.

"I am staying with Miss Ploerel for a little while. Then—I don't know."

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"We can't marry for another six months," he said gravely.

"No, I suppose not."

"I shall hear of you. We shall be two or three months at Titinti at the least. Sir Carl will have news from his sister. Let me know what you are doing."

"Yes, Paul. It's awfully hard being parted after just meeting again. But I know you must go on this trip. Your heart is set on it. I don't want to keep you back."

He said nothing, but gripped her hand, his heart as heavy as lead.

"I want you to be happy, Paul," she murmured. "I want it more than anything else in the world. It will be my only happiness."

He could still find nothing to say, but he kissed her gently, kindly, regretfully, and went away, waving his hat, with misery in his heart and fear in his soul.

CHAPTER V.

JOHN BARLEYCORN.

ON the morning after Cameron's departure for Entebbe, Claudia Scott came out into a blaze of sunshine. She established herself in a camp chair in the shade of a giant tree at the side of the clearing to do some mending.

She wore a skirt of white duck and a white silk blouse under a white cashmere cardigan, and a white felt hat with a black ribbon round it. The whiteness brought out the beautiful richness of her chestnut hair, and the day's complete rest had taken the drawn look from her face. Her skin was the kind that freckles but does not tan.

Her face was still very pale and unnaturally thin, which made her steadfast hazel eyes look so large that they dominated the other features. Looking at her, she was just a plain, capable young woman who would never set the world on fire, for whose sake no men would quarrel and no wars would be fought.

And yet at that very moment Paul Cameron was thinking of her, and wondering why, and Robert Grant, who had left the camp before dawn for a day's shooting, was also thinking how pleasant it would be to get back to dinner with Miss Scott there to welcome him with her cheery voice and that sudden smile that made you feel warm and at peace with all the world.

Her attractiveness was just the kind that is impossible to explain.

She heard a man's voice shouting to some of the boys, and a moment later a big figure came out of one of the tents. Dressed all in white, the man looked bigger even than he was. There was a looseness about his figure a little displeasing in contrast with his age. He looked somewhere round about thirty. He came forward, raising his white, green-lined helmet to Claudia.

"You are the lady of the many adventures," he said in a full, gurgling voice that sounded something like oil being poured out of a bottle.

"And you are Dr. Merridew," she answered, with her sunny smile. "I hope you are better."

"As better as I shall ever be in this filthy climate," he said, and then laughed, his big shoulders heaving. The effort seemed to be considerable, for perspiration poured down his face.

She took stock of the man, who yelled at a boy to bring him a chair. He was unwieldy, but strong-looking. Indeed, he looked as strong as a bull buffalo. His head was large, with a heavy crop of sleek black hair. He was olive-skinned, and his nose and chin were fat and massive without being bold.

His lips were thick and very red, and his teeth glistened like those of the natives. His cheeks were full, and his eyes were large and gleamed brownly behind very thick convex glasses set in gold-rimmed pince nez.

A personality, thought Claudia. She couldn't size him up at all, and she was generally rather good at such exercises of the judgment. A decided personality. But of what kind?

She could not understand why he seemed so loosely put together for such a strong man, and why he did not keep steady on his feet, but lurched ever so slightly, as he waited for his chair.

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Or why he barked angrily at the boy in Luganda when he brought him the chair, and scowled after him when he ran away with the funny loping trot of his tribe.

"I hate these natives," he said.

"Do you?" asked Claudia, a little ruffled. "I've always got on very well with them. You only have to be decent to them—and firm."

She looked at him again. There was something queer about him, she decided. Somehow or other, there exuded from him a great knowledge. It seemed to her that he was dark in color—she could not explain the conceit—and that he knew profound things that ordinary people did not know.

"Where is Mr. Grant?" she asked.

"He went out very early. They reported elephants again, going northeast. Cameron was particularly anxious that some meat should be distributed before we leave here. There are several friendly villages. They have told you about Lacey's death, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Claudia sadly. "It was too dreadful."

"We were close to a village when it happened. The natives were helpful. Some of our boys were taken with panic. Grant has gone to get meat for them."

"I see. Are you looking forward to Lake Rudolf, Dr. Merridew?"

"I am in a way. But I loathe this country. I detest barbarism and swamps and everything like that."

"But don't you care for sport?"

"Oh, up to a point! Do you shoot, Miss Scott?"

Claudia shook her head. "I've never had a gun in my hand. My father didn't like it. My brother didn't shoot, either, unless it was absolutely necessary. He was a doctor, too."

"Oh, yes! Died of black-water, didn't he? I believe I've got a cure for it. I'm working away, but there's not much chance of observation since I left the Gold Coast. And your father was the famous naturalist! Of course I've heard of him. He went about with a Bible, instead of a gun, didn't he?"

"And a kind heart," Claudia put in.

"Oh, now you're scolding me!" Merridew looked at her and smiled broadly. She could not understand his smile any more than she could the rest of him. It was puzzling in its vacancy, no more intelligent than a native's of one of the lowest tribes. And yet he was obviously an intelligent man.

Grant had told her that Merridew had cured several boys of one of the mysterious tropical diseases of which she had some knowledge because of her training. And he was not only intelligent, but he had some power that one could not but feel. Then why that senseless smile?

He drew his chair nearer to her, and, involuntarily, she reached out to the camp table for her work basket, and in so doing edged a little further away.

"Miss Scott, I loathe this country," he said.

"Then why don't you go back to England?" she asked coolly.

"I can't. Haven't they told you? My wife's mad. Poor girl! She is in an asylum."

Neither Cameron nor Grant had mentioned the melancholy fact. It had the natural effect of enlisting Claudia's sympathy, and for the moment of stifling that instinctive recoil from the big, dark-faced, oily haired man. Her voice became sympathetic.

"Oh, how dreadful! How sad for you! Is there no hope of her recovery?"

"No. It is the worst form and hereditary. Two of her brothers committed suicide; one of them was almost a child. Besides, as a nurse, you should know that insanity is never curable."

"How do you know that I am a nurse?" she asked, a trifle ruffled again.

"Grant told me that you had been trained. You are much too nice to be a nurse, though."

"Dr. Merridew!" she exclaimed, thoroughly affronted.

"Oh, I know all about the nobility of the calling and all that, but disease is hideous, and a beautiful woman should have nothing to do with it."

What an extraordinary man! In her amazement at his sentiments she over-

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looked the fact that he had the impertinence to call her beautiful to her face. She knew perfectly well that she was not beautiful, and it could only be said in mockery.

But he said stranger things yet.

"I do need your sympathy, Miss Scott. I am a most unhappy man. Think of me—I can never marry again. I must spend all my life alone. It is a cruel fate, isn't it? My mind is never at rest. I think day and night of how different my life might have been. I am a prisoner, tied to a mad woman. And I am only thirty. I cannot ask you, for instance, to marry me. I can never have the happy home life of other men."

"Dr. Merridew!" said Claudia angrily. "You are quite impossible! I must ask you not to say such ridiculous things."

"They are far from ridiculous, Miss Scott."

He smiled at her, and again she had that uneasy feeling of something she could not possibly understand.

In a short time she made some excuse and left him; and for the rest of the day, except at luncheon, she successfully avoided him, staying in her tent writing letters, which Grant had told her were to be taken by a runner to the nearest post house the following day.

When Grant came back, Claudia met him with great relief in her face.

"Where is Merridew?" he asked her, with a quick glance out of his little green-gray eyes.

"In his tent, I think," she answered.

Grant made some remark about cleaning himself up, and Claudia returned to the *banda* into which the natives were bringing the lanterns. It was already dark in the camp, although in the western sky there was a blaze of orange and crimson coming in patches and bold stripes through the forest.

Grant went straight to Merridew's tent. It was in complete darkness. He called out to him, but there was no answer. He went in, and was met with a strong odor of spirits, and heard stertorous breathing from the camp bed. He took out his pocket electric torch and flashed the light on Merridew's face, flushed, purple, fatuous, and gross.

"Dead drunk," said the disgusted Bobbie to himself. "This is getting a bit thick."

He went out of the doctor's tent and into the stores' tent at the back of the camp. He sent boys for lanterns and investigated the cases of whisky, brandy, and gin. When he had finished he gave a long, low whistle.

He sent for the man who had charge of the stores, and began to question him. Lengo was his name, and he could talk a little English, a few broken words mixed up with Swahili that passed currency between white and black. Grant had no facility for languages and could only just make himself understood.

"Where all whisky go?" he asked. "Three bottles since yesterday. You know I count—one, two, three."

Lengo declared that he knew nothing about it. Grant got nasty, in his dry way, and the native became very perturbed.

"Bribed," said Grant to himself.

"Tell the truth," he said to Lengo, "or I take big stick to you. Was it the *Laibon* (medicine man)?"

"Yes, *bwana*," admitted Lengo miserably. "White *Laibon* he took the big fire-water bottles."

That was enough for Grant.

At dinner, at which Merridew did not show up, Claudia asked Grant:

"Is Dr. Merridew bad again?"

"Yes," he answered. Then, after a moment's pause, he asked a trifle nervously: "Miss Scott, did you notice anything queer about Merridew at lunch? Forgive me, I hate doing it, but I'm worried. Do you think he had too much to drink?"

"He did drink a lot," she answered. "But I don't know whether it was too much. People vary so, don't they? Especially in the tropics."

"Was it whisky?"

"Yes."

"I'm worried," repeated the Scotchman. "I hope Cameron won't be very long. I've noticed it for quite a spell now. Cameron was so seedy I didn't tell him. But it's too

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much of a responsibility to shoulder if he's going to get worse. Especially with natives about."

"I suppose he broods a lot," said Claudia. "He told me about his wife being mad. It's a sad story. Perhaps that's why he takes to drink. We must try to help him, Mr. Grant."

The man smiled at her quiet cheerfulness. It did him good. He had never met a woman at all like her before.

CHAPTER VI.

HONOR FORBIDS.

CLAUDIA was alone in the camp when Cameron returned in the middle of a wonderful day. It was the beginning of July, the coolest month of the year in those unhealthy parts, and there was some life in the air that made one realize one was more than a thousand feet above the level of the sea.

Cameron had sent word in advance of his *safari* that they had better wait in the camp for him, as he had met a native in Butiaba who had done the trek cross country to Lake Rudolf before and engaged him to accompany them.

Claudia was just dressing the arm of one of the boys when Cameron turned up. Mosquito bites had made the flesh septic, and she was scolding him for being too lazy to respect the most elementary laws of cleanliness.

Cameron smiled, as he called out his greeting:

"Doing good as usual, Miss Scott!"

A very faint rose flush crept into her pale cheeks, as she smiled back, and the native greeted the big fair man with a delighted "*Jambo, bwana!*"

"Mr. Grant and Dr. Merridew are over at the village," Claudia informed Cameron. "There is a specially wonderful medicine man to stay with the Chief, and Dr. Merridew was anxious to have a talk with him. They say he is the most powerful witch doctor in Africa and his *Ju-ju* is the most terrible. I wanted to go, too, but I slightly sprained my ankle three days ago, and I wanted to be quite well for our journey."

"I have brought you a pair of superboots," he informed her.

They talked and laughed as if they had known each other all their lives. At luncheon, in the sudden intimacy of a meal *à deux*, a quiet fell between them. Cameron was hungry, but Claudia ate very little.

Afterward, in talking about the vegetation of the forest, he suggested he should take her along the path he had had cut through to a place where grew the most wonderful creepers he had ever seen in all his wanderings. It was not very far, and she said her ankle was quite equal to it.

It was a strangely enchanted spot that they reached. The daylight hardly penetrated into it. It was like some night stage set, lit with a greenish luminosity. Underfoot, the mossy growths were thick and springy, like a mattress.

The enormous branches of the creepers twining round the tree trunks carried huge fleshy leaves and great flowers of mixed purple and orange and brown, like giant butterflies, their petals as thick as a man's finger. They glowed in that semi-twilight like a garland of monster jewels.

Claudia was very silent. It was a world hardly real. She alone in it and the big man beside her, powerful, dominant, magnetic, with his dark blue eyes and strong light brown hair, with leonine streaks of tawny gold.

They turned back, and both sighed.

Suddenly Cameron lifted his gun and shouted to her to stand back. After the report, she saw a snake writhing in its death agony.

"A nasty one," he said. As he turned to her, she saw that his face was gray, and his eyes sent a message that gave her a sharp thrill. "If it bit you, you would be dead in five minutes."

They stood still a moment, Cameron looked down at her. They were close to each other. With a gesture of uncontrolable impulse he took her hand.

At the touch of it he knew. He loved her, this girl with the pale face and serious eyes and cheery voice and sunny smile. He loved her. His heart went out to her. He had been thinking of her all the time, ever since he left the camp.

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He loved her. But it was too late. Mary Stour was free. They would marry in six months' time.

He let go Claudia's hand. She gave a low, nervous laugh. It frightened him because it was unlike her and might mean that she, too, had some feeling for him.

He silently cursed his fate, saying conventionally:

"I'm afraid I gave you a shock, Miss Scott. But I've seen a pal bitten by one of those snakes. And I've never forgotten it."

They went back in silence to the camp.

CHAPTER VII.

THAT INESCAPABLE CALL.

SOME eight weeks later, Claudia stood in front of her tent in the camp near the shore of Lake Rudolf, gazing at one of the most remarkable scenes that the eyes of man have ever looked upon.

The long cross country journey, on foot, with here and there a stretch in bullock carts, and a march or two in her *machila,* had been uneventful. Swamps and forest at first, then a week of open bush country, with short grass, then through a rainy belt to the lower-lying hot and arid plains that led northward to the shores of Lake Rudolf.

The natives proved friendly everywhere and readily brought supplies. The white men shot for meat for them every now and then, and the *safari* went on with countless blessings showered on it. The most trying part of the trek was the noisy behavior of the porters—Wanyamwezi most of them, the finest, strongest, most industrious of all the tribes used for this purpose—who sang and shouted on the march. Even after the longest day they would dance and sing and play all sorts of weird instruments and beat tins far into the night.

They had arrived at the mission station at Titinti, lying on a plateau among low, rocky hills, the day before, and to their astonishment, had found it shut up. There was the long low house, built of rock and rude mortar, and roofed with local slate that Mr. Donald and his boys had quarried themselves.

Here was the completed part of the hospital, two floors of the same rugged but solid construction, and on each side a wing projected, the walls of which were only a few feet above the ground. Both house and hospital were deserted.

It was not only startling, but somewhat embarrassing for Claudia. What could possibly have taken the Donalds away? They had been there a few weeks ago, when Sir Carl Ploerel's man had been taking photographs of the site of the ancient remains.

They were both in good health, keen, enthusiastic, overflowing with desire to help the natives smitten with so many terrible diseases. It was the center of a very wild country, half nomadic.

Some of the tribes were constantly on the move with their sheep and goats; others lived in scattered villages among the rocks, and lower down among the rich vegetation of the lake shores. From a hundred miles they had brought their patients when it became known in the mysterious fashion of Africa that the white *Laibon* was there to heal them.

And now this devoted couple had disappeared into thin air.

There was no other dwelling near the mission, so Cameron had sent a runner to the nearest village, who had returned to where they were pitching their camp later on, with the report that nothing was known about the departure of the white *Laibon* and his wife.

There was nothing to be done, Claudia must stay with the *safari* until news of her friends arrived.

So here she was the next day, forming part of the little town of tents risen up in a night on the rocky tableland about a mile and a half from the mission station and some hundred feet lower. It was afternoon. She was alone.

Cameron had gone to seek news of the Donalds. Grant and the doctor were down at the excavations in a well-like plain, all gray brown, with lava streams twisted and tortured into the most fantastic shapes that reached almost to the shores of the lake, blue as indigo, lying some two hundred feet below the camp.

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On her right, a few miles away, rose the enormous bulk of the great volcano, seven thousand feet into the hot dry air of that rainless land. Riven in two by a mighty upheaval of nature, its upper slopes formed two monstrous precipices with sheer perpendicular walls three thousand feet high.

It was a strange landscape, vivid and yet dead in the quivering air, like strong, dry wine, the treeless gray-brown fantastic lava streams, monstrous and seemingly impassable, that had at one time in the dim past rushed down from Kulol and buried some city of unknown men as the red-hot streams of Vesuvius buried Pompeii and the ashes buried Herculaneum.

It did not seem real to Claudia. She felt at once excited and depressed. She had come here to work, to lose herself, to chasten the violence of her grief for her beloved brother. And she found herself alone in a camp with three strange men.

There was activity and bustle all around her, and the ceaseless chatter and song of the porters who were erecting fencing of basket work made from the tall thick grass they had been down to the lake to fetch. Her tent was a little apart from the rest. It was a big camp, occupying about an acre of the flat rock.

She looked behind her up toward the deserted mission. Was she sorry? She didn't know. What was to become of her? She didn't know either.

She couldn't stay here, of course. But it would be an undertaking to get back to the coast by herself. And it would cost more than she could possibly afford. She had expected to live with the Donalds for some time and to pay her way on a modest scale.

She did not know how she stood financially until her brother's affairs were settled. At the moment she had about a hundred and fifty pounds sterling with her, being what poor Vincent had carried for emergencies.

Just then she saw Cameron coming toward her, walking with his long, easy stride, carying his gun, with four boys loaded with a fine topi behind him.

He soon reached her side.

"You'll have a treat for dinner, Miss Scott," he said. "I find a topi steak quite a luxury—after all our salted rhino tongue." He made a grimace, and she laughed.

"For a person who's roughed it such a lot, you are an awful epicure, Mr. Cameron," she said.

They were on terms of frank comradeship. Cameron did not attempt to disguise his approval of the frail-looking girl in her worn khaki, who could do her day's march like a man, and who mended their clothes and tended the natives' most disgusting sores and talked of books and pictures and other things of the mind, all with the same bright cheerfulness.

But he was somehow always conscious of the depths in her, of her sorrow and loneliness. He had been a lucky fellow, her brother. Would any one mourn for him like that? he wondered. He had no sister or brother! his parents were long dead; he had no family at all.

He tried to think of Claudia as a brother would. He had resolutely shut away that spellbound hour in the forest in Uganda, with its mysterious darkness and its jewel-like flowers; and the moment when he had killed the snake and he had taken her hand and a blinding flash of revelation had shown his own heart to him.

He must not think of that. When this trip was over he must go back to Mary Stour. She would be waiting for him. He knew that. She would not tire of waiting.

It was his fate. That was cowardly. It was not fate. It was a chain that he had forged himself. How could he trust himself, anyhow?

How did he really know that he loved Claudia Scott? He might be deceiving himself again. He had *known* that he loved Mary. He had spent weeks of torment and agony when he was separated from her. He had been convinced that no other woman would ever enter his life.

As a matter of fact, he had looked on all with complete indifference until now, although smiles and gentle words and soft glances had paved his way whenever he showed himself in civilized places at home or abroad.

This was different. He did not know what it meant. He could not analyze his

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feelings. It was—just different. This girl made no appeal to his eye or to his senses that he knew of. It was only that she drew him and held him and would not let him go.

All through the long trek he had pretended that he was her brother, but he knew that he was her lover all the time. It was those depths in her—something serious and steadfast, like her eyes, something unbreakably cheerful, like her voice, something all the time unconscious, quite indescribable, but the most potent magic he had ever known.

"But do tell me," she added anxiously, "have you found out anything about the Donalds?"

"No," he answered. "It's a mystery. I've been as far as the village of the most intelligent of the neighboring chiefs. He knows nothing, or professes to know nothing. He says his people took a sick boy to the hospital last week and found it shut up. The people in the nearer villages say the same.

"But of course it's nonsense. Some one must have seen them go. The nearest village is less than a mile away and in full sight of the mission. There were several natives on the hospital staff, and the Donalds' personal servants. And he was in the habit of holding mission services twice a week."

"You think they are lying, then?" asked Claudia.

"Obviously, some one must be. The Donalds can't have disintegrated into space."

"You are uneasy, Mr. Cameron?"

"I am, Miss Scott."

"Why?"

As frankly as she asked the question he answered it.

"I found on my way back that the mission house was not entirely closed. I got in by a back door that had not been locked and had a look round.

"There was a good deal of disorder in one room—the small room that Mrs. Donald used as a dispensary before the hospital building was begun. Some chairs were overturned and the curtains were torn down, as if somebody had held on to them. And I found a knife on the floor with blood-stains on it."

"Oh!" cried Claudia, alarmed and indignant. "Do you think they have been hurt—murdered, perhaps?"

"I don't know what to think. I feel sure it is human blood. It's not a native knife, but you know how we hunters trade all sorts of things, and a native may have got hold of it in that way.

"But I can't see any object in turning on the Donalds. They were only doing good, and the natives round here are notoriously peaceful, although they do drink a mixture of bullock's blood and milk. But then," he added in the time-worn phrase, "you never know what is going to happen in Africa."

"What are you going to do?" she asked, certain that he was going to do something.

"The chief told me his people had brought news of the approach of Ploerel's *safari*," Cameron answered. "They should be here to-morrow. They will be a small army, and as soon as they arrive I will take as many of our boys as can be spared and go in search of the Donalds. It seems to be the only thing to do."

"Yes, of course," assented Claudia. After a short pause she added: "I don't quite know what to do, Mr. Cameron. There's no reason for me to stay here now."

"There's every reason," wordlessly said the strong voice of Cameron's heart. "There is every reason in the world!" But aloud he remarked quietly: "Stay until Ploerel's caravan arrives, Miss Scott. It's just possible we may have had news by that time; but if not, you can certainly borrow some of his boys, and I dare say he will have a string of Arab horses and a dozen *machilas*, if not an airplane. He does everything *en prince*, and he's a generous old bird. It's quite the best plan, believe me."

"Yes, I expect it is," the girl said thoughtfully. "It's rather imposing on Sir Carl, but if you say he will understand I shall be most grateful. Oh, but I can't bear to think about the poor dear Donalds!" she added. "If I could only do something! I feel I must do something."

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It was the keynote of her character, Cameron felt once more, the great strong cry of her heart—to help, to help!

The mystery of the missionaries' disappearance hung over the little party for the rest of the day.

They dined in a big tent they had rigged up and fortified with a low wall of rock prized from the flat, craggy place on which the camp was pitched. The fires blazed; the topi steaks were tender as the choicest fillet; the especial luxury of fried sweet potatoes gave an edge to the men's appetite; the finishing touch was the perfect coffee that Claudia brewed after a fashion of her own.

Runners came in about nine o'clock to say that Sir Carl Ploerel's party would arrive next morning. Merridew and Grant were playing chess. Cameron lifted the tent flap and described a curious moon effect and asked Claudia if she would like to come outside.

As the two went out, Merridew looked at his opponent with a wink that tilted his thick convex glasses sidewise. Grant returned it with a stare that made his little eyes look like dark jade beads.

Outside the atmosphere was as curious as Cameron had said. There were thick mists rising from the lake that looked like the softest of new white blankets. The sky was very dark, and the moon, riding high, was as red as the sun in setting, but hazy, as seen through a veil of shot silk. The camp hung suspended between sky and cloud, its fires blazing around it like the awful and sacred ring in which Brunhilde slept, waiting for the fearless and radiant being who would dare the flames and snatch her into the world again.

Claudia Scott sighed, but she said nothing.

They walked to the farthest point of the camp, away from the tents of the *safari,* where a boisterous din affronted the marvelous night.

As they stood side by side, Claudia said in her usual frank voice:

"You are right, Mr. Cameron. It's like nothing I have ever seen."

"But you have seen it before, Miss Scott!" It was like a challenge in his quiet voice.

"Yes—when I was with the Donalds." And abruptly she fell into silence.

"And wasn't it like this?" Something warm, wooing, was in his voice now.

"No." She caught her breath, and then laughed. "I shall hate to leave it, Mr. Cameron, just as you are going to begin work. It will be so thrilling. I do wonder what you will find."

"Nothing," came his reply, piercing the night.

"Oh! But how can you know? I thought you had such great hopes."

"Nothing," he said, "because I shall lose you."

It was out. He had spoken. Claudia was silent.

He took her in his arms, heedless of the moon and the clouds and the world around.

"I love you, I love you," he said. "I can't let you go. I have found you in the waste places, soul of my soul—my comrade, my fellow traveler—everything on earth."

His voice twined itself like a golden string round her heart. She trembled in his arms. She could not speak. Her lips gave him his answer.

"You love me!" he whispered, after those first long moments.

"I love you," she whispered back. "I can't believe it. It's too wonderful."

In all but silence they stood for a time. His few words were hot with passion; hers came with difficulty.

"You are mine," he said fiercely. "Mine—mine—I will never let you go."

"I am yours," she said gravely. "It is too wonderful."

He felt the depths in her answering to his depths—that indescribable, almost unimagined something that made her, ordinary although she was, unlike all other women.

The exotic and far-famed beauty of Mary Stour meant nothing to him at all, and he would have followed the sunny smile and cheery, outdoor voice of Claudia Scott to the uttermost ends of the earth.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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Trail o' Dreams

By GARRET SMITH

Author of "Blizzard Wolf," "A Letter of Discredit," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

TONY REGAN was day-dreaming again. Absent-mindedly he brought the nose of the heavy sledgehammer down once more on the head of a spike that helped clamp the new rail into place. Then, quite forgetting that the spikes on the other side of this important rail were yet undriven, he straightened his tall lithe form and gave himself up to his dream—the radiant vision that had haunted him and taunted him ever since he could remember. It was unusually vivid just now.

This was a bad time for Tony Regan to be day-dreaming. On the secure spiking of that new rail would depend in a few minutes the safety of several hundred lives when the Transcontinental Flyer would hurl its gleaming length around the curve like a giant thunderbolt.

The train Tony had by no means forgotten. The daily passage of this messenger from the outside world he had never seen had a close connection with his dream. It was the one touch of glamour in a drab life whose horizon was otherwise bounded by the sordid atmosphere of this prairie shanty town—one concrete fact in his dream.

A glance at the sun told him it was within a minute or two of noon. The section boss with the rest of the gang had gone on around the bend to begin another bit of repair. Tony had been left to complete this. It would hardly pay to report back before dinner. His father's shanty was right back of him at the top of the bank. It was one of the lucky days when he could have a hot dinner at home.

Still forgetting that he had left that fatal rail only half guarded, he leaped lightly up

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the bank and sat down to wait for the passing of the magic whirlwind caravan. As he watched, the long line of gleaming rails shimmering in the summer sun faded from his conscious sight. The flat open country beyond seemed to roll up into magnificent mountain ridges and its dreary, treeless surface clothe itself in a robe of green pine and oak and maple. And in the foreground at his feet a broad blue river sparkled in the sunlight.

But Tony's dream-eyes centered now as always on a house halfway up the mountain. It was a house of slender white pillars, of soft-green gables and graceful arched windows, its surrounding garden suggesting delightful vistas of flowering shrubbery.

At this point in his dream Tony was suddenly transferred in a flash as if on a magic carpet across the blue river to the grounds in front of the white-pillared house.

Then he saw at the end of a path lined with flowering shrubs, coming through a mystic arch flaming with rose bloom, the beautiful lady of his dream. She was always the same, never older, though she had haunted him thus in his day-dream for over twenty years now.

But at this point he heard the distant scream of a whistle. This was always the transition to reality when his dream came upon him at noon. The whistle meant the approach of the Transcontinental Flyer, crowded with those fortunate beings who came from a land of broad blue rivers, of green mountains, and beautiful women.

The vision still hung in the background of his mind, though now his eyes again clearly saw the gleaming curves of rails, watching eagerly for the flyer to plunge into sight. He could hear its distant rumble around the bend a mile away.

But as his eyes rested on the long bands of metal, another association of ideas began to stir uneasily in his mind. Rails! A rail! Tony suddenly jumped to his feet! He had been spiking down a rail against which, in another minute, the big train would hurl its tremendous weight. Had he finished the job? He hadn't! He remembered now.

Tony leaped down the bank and ran to the new rail. One glance confirmed his fear. Not a spike had been driven along the outer side. And it was the rail on the outside of the curve, the one that must bear the full pressure of the train.

A moment he stood paralyzed with terror. Then he leaped to action. Snatching his red bandanna handkerchief from his pocket, he raced down the track toward the approaching express, waving the gaudy rag and yelling in futile desperation. Would the engineer see him in time? Would it be possible to stop that great flying bulk before it hit the treacherous rail?

He ran till the locomotive, its whistle shrieking wildly, was almost upon him. Then he leaped off the track and fell panting on the cinders. But as the train swept by he heard the scream of the brakes, and by the time the last car had passed its speed had slackened perceptibly.

For a moment as he watched he thought disaster had been averted; but he reckoned too soon. The engine struck the weak spot in the curve still going at nearly half speed. He saw the monster shudder and buck like a frightened broncho; then, steam escaping around it with the sound of a great tired sigh, it rolled over on its side in the ditch. The engineer and the fireman leaped to safety as it fell.

II.

TONY held his breath till the last Pullman came to a bumping stop on the ties without tipping over. Thank God for that! Only the baggage and mail coaches had followed the engine into the ditch. If only no one was killed!

Tony wanted to turn his back on the disaster he had caused, to run away and never return. But he felt himself irresistibly drawn toward the wreck. Something within him overruled his fear; told him that to run away from the consequences of his act would be a dirty trick, a thing he could not do.

He climbed up the bank and hurried forward till he stood unnoticed in the crowd of passengers and neighbors who were thronging now about his father's shanty. Watching till he saw the train con-

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ductor, he pushed through the crowd and hailed him as he passed.

"Anybody killed?" he asked breathlessly.

"Nope."

"Badly hurt?"

"Nope."

A big part of his load of fear lifted suddenly; but it was bad enough as it was.

In spite of his lingering horror and dread of consequences, he began now to notice the people around him. He became acutely conscious of his soiled and shabby work-clothes. His previous experience in close contact with people in other than work-clothes had been limited mainly to Saturday night and Sunday dress-up of his shanty-town neighbors, except for local clergymen and business men, and an occasional traveling man. But these people were different with a difference he found indefinable but perfectly evident.

He studied these strange beings in contrast with his neighbors and the train crew, even the nattily uniformed Pullman men. But, shy, awkward and uncouth as he felt, he became nevertheless conscious, deep down within him, of a feeling of kinship for these strangers. They, and not the shabby shanty-town neighbors, were really his people.

Why did he feel that way, he wondered? Why had he always seen this vivid vision of a life different from the one to which he had been born? Why had he always cherished an ambition to lift himself above these ugly surroundings with which his father and mother and his neighbors were sluggishly content?

Life had always been a painful mystery to Tony, the dreamer.

But here was an end to one dream. When Tony had failed to finish spiking down the new rail he had wrecked something more than the Transcontinental Flyer. He had wrecked a hope he had been cherishing for ten years.

For ever since Tony had been old enough to handle pick and shovel and sledge with the section gang he had been determined to work up in the railroad's service. Some day he'd be section boss, perhaps finally division superintendent. He'd be the rich man of shanty-town. He'd build up the shanty into a fine comfortable home a little at a time. He'd make a new shanty-town, a real city with fine homes.

And that was all suddenly ended. He'd lose his job now. He could never work for the railroad again. Perhaps they'd send him to prison for this.

A voice woke him from his daze. A young lady, one of the passengers, stood at his elbow talking to a middle-aged gentleman. They were looking at his father's shanty.

"Just look at that!" she said. "Of all things in a place like this!"

Tony flushed hotly. They were talking about the shanty that Tony had for years been trying in a blind, groping way to convert into some sort of miniature model of his dream palace.

From a child he had been handy with tools. Year by year, against the ineffectual protests of his no-account father, but with the moral support of his Italian mother's innate love of beauty, he had added touches here and there to what had once been only a tumbledown, unpainted two-room box on a bare clay knoll.

Now it had a low overhanging green roof and white painted walls, slender imitation pillars beside the door, arches over the windows, a vine-clad pergola at one end, a tiny shrub garden around it, and an arch of rambler roses.

At such pretentiousness all shanty-town jeered. Tony held his breath now to hear if this being from another world would share that ridicule. He did not realize that on her next words hung his destiny.

"Why, it's lovely!" the lady exclaimed. "A little oasis of beauty in a wilderness of barren ugliness! Imagine any one who has such a sense of beauty living here! He should be out in the world building beautiful homes and gardens. Why, it reminds me of—"

The lady turned away, and Tony did not hear what she was reminded of. But he had heard enough. It was as though he had been smitten by a great white light from heaven. His suddenly thwarted ambition to be a railroad man as suddenly seemed trivial and ridiculous.

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He was destined to go out into the world and be a builder of beautiful homes and gardens. Somewhere in the world his life-long dream was a reality. In the world people did not jeer at beauty, but loved it. That was where he belonged.

III.

In upon his reverie broke a harsh, indignant voice. It was that of the section boss, Mike Holley; with him was a well-dressed stranger, some one from the division superintendent's office, who had just arrived on the wreck train; and Jim Farrell, the local constable.

"That's the young fool that's to blame!" Mike roared, pointing at Tony. "Arrest him, Jim."

An hour later Tony Regan was on his way to the county seat to be tried for criminal negligence. But he took his arrest with philosophical calm, almost with a sort of elation. It had not been unexpected. He had known it must come the moment he saw the flyer's engine topple into the ditch. He knew he deserved it, and some power within him forbade his avoiding it by flight. They might send him to prison for months, perhaps for years. But the glow of his new purpose made that prospect seem negligible. He understood that the carrying out of his purpose meant study. In prison he would have that opportunity.

During the month while he lay in jail awaiting trial his dream of the house on the mountainside above the broad river was with him constantly. And always with it was the dream woman, ever beautiful, ever young. But he no longer puzzled as he had over the mysterious origin of the dream. Now his thought was all of whither the dream led. He was on his way to make the dream come true. Prison could be no more than a brief interlude, and he might make it a means toward that end.

When his trial came off at last Tony Regan brought it to an abrupt end by promptly and of his own accord pleading guilty. Before sentencing him, the judge asked, according to custom, if he had anything to say before sentence was pronounced.

"Yes," Tony replied. "I'm sorry I did it. I was thinkin' o' something else when I oughta had my mind on my work. Serves me right to go to prison. If you'll tell me how much the damages cost the railroad I'll pay it back some day."

The judge raised his eyebrows at this unusual speech, and for the first time took the trouble to study this young prisoner, whose case he had been considering up to now only in the most perfunctory fashion.

He was impressed by the tall, clean-cut figure, straight and graceful in spite of his cheap ready-made suit. The dark features were finely molded, the dreamy brown eyes intelligent. This was not a criminal type or an ordinary laborer. The judge was curious.

"Regan, who told you that you ought to pay this money back?"

Tony looked surprised. "Nobody. Of course I ought to. Didn't I smash the train?"

"Where do you expect to get the money?"

"I'm goin' to earn it."

"But do you realize that the damages to that train and to the road bed amount to over five thousand dollars?"

"I didn't know. I'll pay it some day."

"It 'll take a good many years to save that out of a laborer's wages."

"I ain't goin' to be a laborer always," Tony declared proudly.

"What do you expect to be?"

Tony flushed. It went strongly against the grain to avow his newborn ambition. But one must answer a judge.

"I'm goin' to build houses."

"I see. How much schooling have you had?"

"I went to school till I was twelve."

"Did you like it?"

"Yes."

"Why did you quit?"

"Folks made me go to work."

"Do they need you to help support them?"

"No. Pop has a pension from the Spanish War. He ain't able to work much, but he does jobs around. Mom does washing. My younger brother works on the

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tracks. No, they don't need me now. I'll help 'em some day if they do."

"Let's see—you come from Blane's Crossing, Shanty-town, they call it. Have you always lived there?"

"I was born there; lived there all but a year when I was a baby an' my mother worked out over in Morgantown."

"Hum! Is there any one here who can tell me about this prisoner's past record?"

Mike Holly, the section boss, who had been subpœnaed as a witness, came forward sullenly. Mike had no love for Tony since the accident. Mike had been severely reprimanded and fined for having left one man alone to finish a repair without checking up on him. Only the facts that a serious emergency excused this unusual procedure and that Mike was a good track boss had saved him his job. Nevertheless, the very fact that his own position was none too strong made it advisable to tell the truth. He admitted, therefore, that Tony's record up to now had been a good one. "Just a little rattle-headed at times and forgetful like, and full of queer ideas."

The judge pondered the matter.

"Regan," he decided finally, "I think I'll give you a chance to pay up that money. It 'll do you and the railroad company both more good than sending you to prison. Just to make sure you get started paying up right away I'm going to fine you one thousand dollars, which you must pay at the rate of five dollars a week.

"Until you have paid up that thousand dollars, you must stay within the jurisdiction of the court; that is, in Clair County. If during that time you ever cross the county line or fail to make a single payment on time, without acceptable excuse, I'll send you to prison. Do you understand?"

Tony understood. He understood that he was starting out on his trail o' dreams bearing the load of a five-thousand-dollar debt, but that mattered little to him at the moment, as long as he was starting.

He left the court room with his head in the air.

IV.

TONY decided that, inasmuch as he must stay in Clair County for the next three years or so, he would remain in Morgantown, the county seat. It was a little city of twelve thousand population, the largest town in the county, and offered the best chance for work. He was not disappointed, as he had been expecting to spend some time in the penitentiary. Besides, he knew he had much to learn before tackling the outside work. Here was a good enough place to learn it.

So he returned to Shanty-town merely long enough to say good-by to his father and mother and such few acquaintances as he felt were interested enough to want to see him again. Tony had few real friends at this time.

Even this brief return home was a trying ordeal. Tony had never been very popular with his neighbors. He had always had a feeling that he was somewhat different, not necessarily superior. Indeed, it often seemed that most Shanty-town men were better fitted to get along in their rude surroundings than he.

Yet they had interpreted his shy silences, his natural fastidiousness and love of beauty as a feeling of superiority. Now there were few to sympathize with him in his discomfiture.

As he got off the local train at the little station he caught the eye of Chan Turney, the station agent.

"Hello, Chan," he hailed.

Chan grunted non-committally and turned away.

With a chill resentment in his heart Tony passed on up the street toward his home in the outskirts of the little settlement.

"Oh, lookit! Here's Tony Regan!" piped a small boy.

Faces of women and children appeared in windows and doorways or around corners of shanties as he progressed, only to become averted as his eyes sought theirs.

"Tony's been in jail! Tony's been in jail!" chanted one youngster from a safe distance.

"Tony, the train wrecker!" hooted another.

He was relieved when he reached the shelter of the home he was so soon to leave again. His mother was there alone

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over her washtub. For once his mean-spirited father had his way, and had kept Tony's mother from attending the trial by the simple process of confiscating her pitiful little store of money. The elder Regan had turned completely against his son since the wreck of the flyer. The poor, erratic woman's heart had been broken; but now her eyes blazed with joy.

"Tony! Tony! They let you go? Santa Maria be praised!"

She hurled herself at him and, throwing her suds-soaked arms around his neck, burst into hysterical weeping. Tony patted her shoulder awkwardly, made speechless for the moment by his own emotions. He loved his queer, fiery mother. The few fights he had ever indulged in had been in answer to imputations that she was "wrong in the head."

They were standing thus when his father entered.

"Oh-ho!" he snarled. "So here you are, ye young jailbird. I heard they turned ye loose. A danged injustice, too. Well, ye git right out o' my house!"

"You shan't send him away! Tony, you stay!" screamed his mother.

"Quiet, mother," Tony admonished. Then turning to his father, he towered over him menacingly. "I'll go fast enough when I'm good and ready," he told him coldly. "I'm goin' to stay till night, though, an' you jest try an' put me out 'fore then. Jest try. I'm goin' back to Morgantown to stay, but I'm goin' to keep watch o' you. If I hear you ain't good to mom, I'll come back an' lick the tar outa ye. Now git out an' leave us alone."

The elder man blustered as he went, but he went, slamming the door after him. He really stood in awe of this stalwart son. His younger boy was a poor-spirited chap who let his father keep him under subjection, the one remaining prop to the elder Regan's self-esteem.

"Tony! Tony! You mustn't talk lika that to your papa!" his mother warned. "He's your papa, you know."

"I know he is, an' I'm sorry he is. He can't bawl me out any more. Mom, why don't you come to Morgantown an' live with me? He only abuses you."

"No, no, no! I lova your papa. He go 'way from me once; I never go 'way from him."

Tony had never heard the story of his father's wanderings from his mother's own lips. It had come to him from malicious gossips bit by bit. This was his mother's first reference to it in his presence.

"Mom, how long was pop away from you?"

"Mos' three year. He go when you littla babee, few months old."

"That's when you worked in Morgantown. Were you there all the time he was away?"

"Yes. I go to Morgantown when I hear your pop go there. But I don't find him. He came back himself here. Then I come back here."

"Where did you work?"

"For Mis' Barton in Maple Street. She good woman. But why you ask mamma? You want make her cry?"

Mrs. Regan showed signs of crying again. Tony remembered when he was a small boy the first time he heard from outside sources of his parent's period of wandering; he had tried to ask her about it. Then she had broken into hysterical weeping, and he had never repeated the experiment.

He recalled now just how he had approached the subject. He must have been about six then and had just begun going to school. His new seat mate had hinted at the family scandal.

"Mom," he had said, "Johnnie Reefer says pop ran away once and stayed a long time, and you had to go an' be a hired girl in Morgantown while he was gone. Was Morgantown where there was a big pretty house 'way up high, with trees and flowers around and big river in front and a pretty lady that lived there?"

He remembered the terror in his mother's eyes as she heard him. There was a little of that look there now.

"Tony!" she had screamed. "Don't talk that way about papa! He beat you! What do you say about big houses and rivers and a pretty woman? Are you crazy in the head like they say your poor mom is? Tony, you just dream it. Never say it

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again. They will call you crazy in the head."

Then her hysterics had overcome her.

The incident and his mother's words had made a great impression on Tony. Fear of being called crazy in the head had prevented his ever again referring to his vision of the high, beautiful house on the mountain, and the beautiful dream woman.

He came gradually to accept it as a dream instead of a memory, and he had worried sometimes for fear he was crazy in the head.

But the dream had never lost its vividness, never lost the illusion of being a memory. Now as he questioned his mother Tony was feeling about to see if possibly there were some place in or around Morgantown that had impressed his baby mind and left him with this vision.

At the moment Tony longed more than anything else for some one to talk it all over with, some one who would lend a sympathetic ear.

V.

THERE was in all the world just now only one person to whom he felt he could talk thus freely, and that one was, under the circumstances, probably the one least likely to listen willingly.

Nevertheless, Tony could not resist the impulse to try at least to say good-by to that person. So a good hour before time for the evening train that would bear him back to Morgantown, he bade his mother good-by and left her with the excuse that he must see some people before he left town. In a clumsy bundle were all his belongings except the clothes he wore and his savings, which were securely pinned in an inside pocket. This last item totaled over two hundred dollars, hoarded a little at a time under a loose floor board in his room.

The bag he left at the station, then went on down the crossroad that led back from the tracks through a section of Shanty-town a little more pretentious than the rest of the little settlement.

Past the neatest and best kept cottage in the row he walked slowly, glancing furtively through the lighted windows. But he failed to see the face he sought.

It was the home of his new enemy, Mike Holley, the track boss. Tony was looking for Mike's daughter, Mary. Ever since they had gone to school together Tony had admired Mary, more or less at a distance. She met Tony's sensitive idea of feminine beauty more nearly than any other girl in Shanty-town. She was better dressed and she had gone down to Morgantown to high school.

Altogether, Mary intrigued him. He did not know whether he was in love with Mary or not. Mary hadn't encouraged any such hope, though she was inclined to be friendly, almost chummy, on the occasions when Tony was cleaned up and dressed in his Sunday clothes; that is, if her family weren't around.

Mary's father was a track boss, a position of dignity in Shanty-town. Tony's father was exactly nobody at all. Mike Holley, even before Tony wrecked the flyer, did not countenance intimacy between one of his laborers and his educated daughter.

So, Tony had no great hope now of a chance of saying good-by to Mary. To call for her was useless. Three times he strolled past the house in vain; then he gave it up. He was loitering disconsolately back toward the station along the dim street when he saw a slender white figure approaching. His heart began to beat violently. It was Mary returning from an errand to the store. She nearly passed him in the dark without recognizing him. Or had she and refused to speak? He plucked up courage enough to pronounce her name.

"Why, Tony!" she exclaimed. "I did not know you. I'm so glad they let you go. I've just been reading all about it in the paper at the store; what the judge said and everything. And, Tony, I was so proud of you, the way you acted, and promising to pay back the money and everything. It's just too mean, the way people talk around here!"

Tony felt his head whirling. Such friendliness and praise were totally unexpected.

"Mary, I want to talk with you," he ventured. "I'm going away to-night, on the eight o'clock train. I got only about half an hour. Let's walk up the street."

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The girl hesitated, but only for a moment.

"You go out to the Slocum place and wait a minute. I'll be right along. We can sit on the wall under the trees. You know how dad is. He'd about kill me if he knew."

So, Tony waited on the old stone wall half a mile down the street, and in a few minutes Mary joined him. Then they sat in silence. Tony found that, after all, he didn't know what he wanted to say.

It was the girl who finally broke the silence.

"It was fine of you, Tony, not to try to blame dad for leaving you alone with more than you could finish before the flyer came along. What a shame to blame you for it! I told dad so, too, and he was terribly mad."

"But I was to blame, Mary, Tony insisted. "I had plenty of time to finish the job. I jest forgot it. I—I was dreamin' when I oughta had my mind on my work."

"What were you dreaming about, Tony? Tell me. I don't care what you say or they say. You were fine about it. I always believed you'd do something big some day, Tony. Was that what you were dreamin' about?"

Tony hesitated again, though this was the chance to unburden himself that he had hardly dared hope for. It was hard to begin.

"No, I wasn't dreaming about what I am going to do. Not then. I have been since. But that dream was different."

Haltingly he told her about the dream palace on the mountain with the broad river at its base and the garden and the beautiful woman. Then about his new dream of going out into the world to be a builder of beautiful homes.

"But isn't it strange that you should have such a dream, always the same? Seems as though you must have seen it some time."

"I know it does. That's jest how it seems. But I ain't ever seen it. You know I've always lived here, except a little while in Morgantown when I was a baby. You know they ain't a mountain or a big river or a piece of real woods in hundreds o' miles o' here."

"But, Tony, maybe you saw it once in a movie and have forgotten it."

"How could I? I tell you I had this dream ever since I was a little shaver, four, five years old. They didn't have movies then. Leastwise, not round here. We didn't even have papers er magazines with pictures in 'em around the house till after we boys was 'most grown up.

"Mom can't read, an' pop never does. Nobody ever told me about anything like that. Why, I remember I didn't even know what to call a mountain or river till after I went to school. I sometimes wonder if mom wasn't right when I asked her about it once and she wondered if I was gettin' crazy in the head."

"Nonsense, Tony. Of course not. Lots of folks dream. I do."

"Well, anyhow, I know there is places like that in the world, and I'm goin' to find 'em. I'm goin' to make the dream come true.

"But, Tony," she said wistfully, hesitantly—"the woman you dreamed about. You can't make her come true. If there was a truly woman like her once she's an old woman now."

"That's so, I suppose," he admitted. "What of it?"

He stopped in confusion and looked at the girl. He hadn't intended to admit how much the woman in the dream meant to him. The moon had burst from behind a cloud as they sat there. It softly illumined the tall, slender, not ungraceful figure of Mary Holley. It made a halo of her reddish hair and etherealized her pretty features.

Tony didn't finish his sentence. He suddenly knew why he had always been so drawn to Mary.

Hardly realizing that he did so, he reached out and took her hand in his.

"Why, Mary!" he whispered. "You're my dream girl. You have been all along."

VI.

How long they sat there together on the old stone wall looking into each other's eyes in the moonlight, neither knew. It is doubtful if Tony, the dreamer, would have caught his train for Morgantown as he

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had planned if it had not been for an unseemly and most distressing interruption.

In their preoccupation with each other, neither had heard the approach of Mike Holley, who had grown suspicious over his daughter's prolonged absence and set out in search of her. For a full minute he stood silently fuming at the spectacle of his only daughter in the arms of his young enemy. Then with a snarl of rage he rushed at them.

The couple drew apart in sudden alarm. Then they leaped from the wall. Mary was a little quicker. She seized her father's arm just as he swung at her lover. Mike tried to hurl her off, but she clung tenaciously.

"Don't you dare hit him!" she screamed. "If you do, I'll run away with him. Tony, keep back. Don't touch him. It's time for your train. Run along. Write me as soon's you're settled. When you're ready for me I'll come."

An instant Tony watched the struggle between father and daughter. Then, with sudden impetuous daring, he swooped down upon them and kissed Mary under her astonished father's very eyes. The next instant he was speeding down the road for the train whose whistle he heard a mile down the track.

It was a Tony Regan intoxicated with delicious joy who rode into Morgantown that night. Constantly before his eyes was the vision of Mary standing there in the moonlight defying her father. Her kiss was ever fresh on his lips.

That night in the Morgantown hotel he dreamed that he was in the garden on the mountainside in front of the white-pillared house. Below him the broad river sparkled in the moonlight. But now he seemed to be the grown-up Tony Regan, and he was dressed as were the gentlemen passengers of the flyer.

And now the beautiful lady who came toward him through the rose arch with arms outstretched was Mary Holley. The amended vision remained with him when he awoke. For a long time he lay comparing his original dream lady with Mary Holley, the glorified Mary as he saw her in memory now.

His soberer reason was forced to admit they were not quite identical, though he couldn't exactly define the difference. It gave him a moment of misgiving.

But hope and fancy came to the rescue here. He looked down the vista of the years and saw Mary and himself progressing together, studying and traveling in beautiful countries, living with fine people, becoming more and more like them, Mary gradually growing into the perfect image of his dream lady. Mary might not be quite his dream ideal yet, but she was its glorious promise.

With this conclusion he jumped out of bed ready for his great new adventure with life. As he dressed, his thoughts turned to the more immediately practical. Where would he look for work first? Who could he get to recommend him? Employers always asked where he had worked last. That might mean trouble in getting work. Many people would remember his name from the trial. Would they want to hire a jailbird?

These thoughts turned his mind to Mike Holley. Mike hated him for more than one reason. He couldn't give Mike as a reference. Would Mike leave him alone and give him a chance? Or would he use his influence to injure him and keep him from getting work. Mike had a certain influence through railroad circles. Morgantown was only twenty miles from Shanty-town and Mike Holley. Was Mike's influence strong enough to reach there?

To all these troubling questions Tony was soon to have an unpleasant answer.

VII.

IMMEDIATELY after breakfast Tony started out to find cheap lodgings. From listening to the talk of traveling men around the Shanty-town store, and from rubbing elbows with some of the floating labor that came and went on the section gang, Tony had picked up a few scraps of worldly knowledge about ways of living in larger towns. He knew that in private boarding houses one could live much more cheaply than at hotels.

He remembered, too, that in the Morgan-

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town *Journal,* which he read at home, there were always advertisements of boarding places. He bought a copy now and ran over the list of the dozen or so appearing this morning. Then he started out, list in hand, to look them up in order.

The police officer on the corner near the hotel, from whom he asked his way, was a friendly-appearing chap about his own age.

" You seem to be a stranger in town, buddy. Where ye hail from?"

" Blaire's Crossing. Know where it is? 'Bout twenty west o' here."

" Sure I know. Shanty-town. I come from ten miles north o' there, out on a farm. Only been here five years myself. Say, I knew a guy went to Shanty-town to live —Amos Jones. Used to work on my ol' man's farm. You know him?"

" Sure. Worked on the railroad with him fer a spell. He went to Cincinnati a year ago."

" Well! Well! Seems like seein' somebody from home! So you're a railroad man, eh?"

" I ain't any more. I'm lookin' for a job with somebody buildin' houses, soon's I get a place to live. That's what I'm huntin' fer now."

" Oh, listen, buddy. That's what you wanted that address for, was it? Say, you don't want to go down there. That's a tough section. Let me see your list."

The officer expertly glanced over the addresses and checked three of them with a pencil.

" These two are punk, too. And this one, I guess, would be too rich fer your blood. Would be fer mine. Only swells live there."

In his heart Tony resented this last statement, in spite of its kindly intent. So at a glance this policeman assumed that he didn't belong among swells? And in his heart Tony had cajoled himself into thinking those were the kind of people he did belong among.

He'd show them. After thinking it over he decided that this tabooed " swell place " would be right where he'd go.

However, he thanked the officer and they exchanged names before parting. The other's name was George Kane.

" Look me up any time and tell me how you make out," he invited Tony, as he went on his way.

Surreptitiously, Tony eyed himself in the mirror of a show window. His best suit, which he wore now, had pleased him immensely when he had bought it. Had it not won him the title of " dude " in Shanty-town? It was still in good condition, clean and well pressed. To be sure, he realized now that it was vaguely different from the clothes worn by the gentlemen passengers of the flyer. But it would pass as a starter. He'd soon learn how to dress with the best of them. He certainly didn't suffer by contrast now with the Morgantown men he passed on the street.

So, inquiring his way, he hunted up the swell place. He was a little oppressed with awe as he approached it. To his eye it seemed like a grand establishment. But he chided himself and went firmly up the steps and rang the bell. A supercilious maid admitted him to a waiting room. Presently an elderly landlady in obsolete silk stood haughtily before him.

" What did you wish?" she asked in frigid tones.

" I came to git the room you advertised," he murmured.

" I have no room, sir. It is already engaged. Good day, sir."

She left him to find his way out alone, but she stood in a doorway down the hall watching him suspiciously till he was out of the house.

" The danged old fool!" he muttered to himself ferociously as he strode away. He realized he had been snubbed. It was clear to him that the room was not yet taken. Indeed, he saw it still advertised next day. He was simply not a desirable tenant. His spirits sank low as he went on to the next place on his list.

" Have you any references?" was the question that met him there.

This, too, was a poser. Tony did some quick thinking. Then he gave the name of Mary Holley and Father Zornow, the priest at Shanty-town. He'd drop Mary a line right away and ask her to tip off the clergyman. Tony was not a member of his church, but Mary was, and she would see

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that any one asking information got the right reply.

So he said he would look around a little more and be back in a couple of days after they had looked up his references. He met the same result with the rest of the list. All the desirable places wanted references. So there was nothing to it but to stay at the hotel for a day or two longer.

While on his search he came across Maple Street. He remembered his mother had said she worked for a family of Bartons in that street, and on inquiry he found a family of that name still living there. But their home was a big ugly box. Certainly there was no river or mountain anywhere around Morgantown as far as he had seen. The town lay on an open flat prairie like the region around his home village.

There was still a chance that there might be a hill and river country at no great distance away to which his mother had taken him when they lived in Morgantown, something that might have formed a basis for his dream. It occurred to him to ask his new friend Kane, the policeman, about it, when he ran across him on the way back to his hotel.

"Mountains an' rivers around Morgantown? I should say not," Kane laughed. "There ain't a stream bigger 'n a small creek nearer than three hundred miles, an' the land's flat an' bare's a billiard table fer twice that distance."

That settled it with Tony. Nowhere in the region of Morgantown was his dream country. And with the passing of that hope came the certainty that, whatever the true origin of his day-dream, it was not founded on the memory of any place he had actually seen.

VIII.

NEXT morning Tony began his search for work and was unexpectedly successful. After his experience with boarding house mistresses, he had dreaded applying for a job, for fear employers even of unskilled labor might demand references. But within half an hour after he left his hotel he came upon an excavation for a new building with a sign at its edge announcing that shovelers were wanted.

"Can you handle a shovel?" asked the boss.

"Sure."

"All right, prove it. What's your name?"

"Tony Regan."

"All right, Tony. Hop to it."

That was all. Tony had his overalls with him in a bundle, and in five minutes he was hard at work. He saw his new boss eye him with approval a few minutes later. All day long he kept up with the best of them.

Tony's heart swelled with elation. Here he was, only on the second day of his great quest, and already definitely started on the way to his goal as a builder of houses. He already felt a personal interest in the building. He wondered what it would be used for, who would use it. Would they let him help with the masonry and rest of the building when the foundation was completed, he wondered? Tony had never seen a big building like this put up before. He looked forward with eager curiosity to the next steps in the process.

Then at quitting time his bright hopes were suddenly dashed to the ground. As he was leaving, the boss called to him.

"Here's your pay for to-day, Regan. I won't need you any more," were the words he heard.

Tony was amazed. He knew they were still short-handed. He knew he had done as much work as any of the rest.

"Didn't I work all right?" he stammered.

"I won't need you any more; that's all," was the gruff answer, and the boss walked off.

Tony went back to his hotel, deeply discouraged, and pondered the thing far into the night. Was it possible that already some word had passed around, perhaps from Mike Holley in Shanty-town, that would make it impossible for him to get work? Or had it simply been rumored about that he was a jailbird? Was it impossible for jailbirds to make an honest living? Must he go somewhere else and change his name and conceal his story?

But that, he recalled, was impossible. He must stay in Clair County until his fine was paid. He must report weekly to the court,

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giving his address and sending an installment of the fine. Besides, all concealment, anything hinting at dishonesty, was peculiarly repulsive to Tony. He couldn't lead such a life, he decided, even if it were possible.

Next morning, full of dismal forebodings, he started out to select his boarding house from among those whose mistresses were considering his application. His forebodings were realized.

"I let the room to another gentleman who had excellent references right at hand," he was told at the first place.

"I've decided not to let the room, after all," the second landlady told him.

And so from one excuse to another, all having the same purport. Only one was brutally frank.

"I don't keep jailbirds in my house!" she snapped, and slammed the door in his face.

Thereat, Tony threw his pride to the winds and went to one of the two places his officer friend, Kane, had pronounced impossible. It was pretty bad, Tony realized, judged even by Shanty-town standards. But the slatternly proprietress didn't ask for references, merely demanded pay in advance, and Tony accepted the dingy room on the spot.

On his way to get his baggage he was hailed by Kane.

"Oh, Regan," the officer called, and beckoned him into a secluded doorway. "Say, buddy," he began, "I like you. I think you're on the level. I want to tip you off. You're in bad in this burg—see?"

"Gosh! Don't I know it!" Tony groaned. "What do you know about it?"

"Listen. I'm tippin' you off as a friend. I ain't supposed to. After this I can't know you except as a cop—see? Not when anybody's around. I'll get the devil fer puttin' ye wise if they hear about it. I didn't get wise to who you were when you gave me your name the other day. Of course I know about that wreck, but didn't connect you till we got word at headquarters to keep close tabs on you and run you in the minute we got anything at all on you.

"I got a little underground information later. It seems they's a guy out in your home town got it in for you—feller named Holley; kind of political boss in Shanty-town, I figger.

"Elections are close in this county, an' every little handful o' votes counts. So when a little one-hoss boss wants something at headquarters that don't cost 'em too much they give it to him—see? Well, this Holley wants your scalp—see?

"Now when a guy's on parole like you and commits any crime er misdemeanor, he goes to prison an' serves his full sentence. So they're goin' to git ye if they can, fair er foul—see?"

"I guess I see. They're gittin' me already. They lost me my job for me and kept me outa every decent place to live in town."

Briefly he told his experience of the last two days.

"I see. It's like I'd expect. An' they'll get ye sooner er later in any town in the county ye try. You sure are one unlucky guy. Well, all I gotta say is—watch yer step. If I can help ye, I will, but I gotta look out fer my job."

Tony Regan's experience during the next two months fulfilled Kane's forebodings, except that he did manage to keep out of jail. At the end of the week he was turned out of his boarding house. When he tried to get back in the hotel temporarily, he was told there was no vacant room.

There followed weeks when he was never sure of a shelter at night. Kane had warned him against getting arrested for vagrancy. So when he had no other shelter, he would go out into the country and get lodgings among the farmers, working in the fields when he could get no other employment.

For he got no more chance at building jobs. He could find nothing within the city limits but temporary work of one kind and another—all most unsatisfactory and leading nowhere.

In all this time he received regular and ardent letters from Mary Holley. But in them she reported that she seldom received his letters, as they were usually intercepted by her father or mother. She had never received the one he wrote about boarding house references. Evidently her father had attended to answering such inquiries.

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At the end of two months he was desperate. He thought it all out one night while he lay in a little attic bedroom on a farm where he had been working for a few days. The next day another installment of his fine must be sent in to the court, together with a report of his whereabouts. Then he knew that within two days following he would be compelled to move on again. It was always so. Whoever gave him shelter received word from the gang at headquarters as soon as they learned where he was.

At length Tony came to a decision. This was worse than prison.

In the morning he voluntarily quit his job with the farmer and caught a ride into town. He was going to pay his installment in person this time. He was going to pay it to the judge himself, and it was going to be his last payment.

All day long he waited at the courthouse and only saw the judge finally by intercepting him as he was leaving his chambers for the night.

"Judge Warren, can I see you alone a moment?" he asked timidly.

The judge frowned, a little annoyed. He evidently did not recognize the petitioner for the moment. But Judge Warren was a compassionate man at heart. He sighed wearily.

"Very well," he said, not unkindly. "If it's only for a moment. Come in." He led the way back to his chambers. "Let me see. I've seen you before. What's your name?"

"Tony Regan—the man that wrecked the flyer."

"Oh, yes—I remember. What can I do for you, Regan?"

"Send me to prison," replied Tony Regan.

IX.

JUDGE WARREN eyed Tony keenly for a full minute before he spoke.

"That's an extraordinary request, Regan," he said finally. "Before I grant it, suppose you explain yourself."

Tony told him the whole story of his two months of persecution. The judge listened with growing indignation. Judge Warren was the one public officer in Clair County who was independent of political coercion. He had been elected on a bipartisan ticket and took no part in county politics. Tony had come to the right man with his tale.

"This is an outrage, Regan," he agreed, when Tony had done. "If what you tell me is true—and I have no reason to believe it isn't—I'll see that this is stopped. I'll look into it, of course. There won't be any need of your going to prison."

The judge sat in close thought for a few moments.

"See here, Regan, I've a proposition to make. I can't compel other people to employ you, but I can employ you myself. I have pretty good sized grounds around my house and keep one man to do the work with a little day help now and then, and to act as chauffeur besides. The man I have isn't much of a gardener. I'm planning some new shrubbery and some new outbuildings during the coming year. Suppose I put you in charge over the chauffeur-gardener as a sort of experiment?

"I have a notion, from what you tell me about how you fixed up your father's home, that you may have a natural knack for that sort of thing, landscaping or architecture, or something. Anyhow, you can handle the tools. I know something about it myself, and I'll do the directing at first.

"Meantime, you'll go to night school and study, especially the lines that lead to what you want to do—manual training, mechanical drawing, and so on. I'll give you a chance for a year to show what's in you. What do you think?"

"It—it 'll be great, if you think I can do it," Tony stammered.

"All right then. I'll have quarters prepared for you over the garage. There's a good spare room there. I'm just trying you out. It may not work."

It seemed to Tony that night as he settled himself in the clean comfortable room over the Warren garage that at last his troubles had vanished like a nightmare. Before he went to bed he wrote a long, halting letter to Mary. Letter writing was a painful process to Tony at this stage. And perhaps Mary would never see it. But it

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did him good to pour out his story of his renewed hopes, and as he fell asleep his boyhood dream, that had dimmed a little during the last two months, was present again in all its shimmering glory. He felt this time for sure that he was on his way to realizing it.

And, for a long period, smooth-flowing events justified his hope. And justified, too, was the judge's guess at the superior intelligence and innate good taste of the Shanty-town youth. Tony took to gardening avidly. He quickly absorbed such lore as the judge had to impart out of his knowledge as an enthusiastic amateur. The judge supplied him with the best literature on the subjects, both books and periodicals, and he devoured them all. He paid equal attention to the subject of architecture and practical building. For Tony never lost sight of his ambition to be a builder of beautiful homes, and some day the Beautiful Home, the house of his dream.

And in night school, to which he devoted himself with the same enthusiasm, he was laying a firm foundation of educational rudiments. In addition to the common branches he was perfecting himself in mechanical drawing as well as carpentry and masonry in the manual training courses.

The following summer Tony built a new garage and summerhouse for the judge from an original design of his own. When it was done it attracted so much attention in the neighborhood that one of the neighbors came to Tony one day and asked him if he wouldn't build something similar for him. Tony went to the judge about it.

"Tony," announced the judge, "that means you are ready to launch out for yourself. I'll finance you a little as a silent partner, and you'll keep me on as a client. We'll open a little office for you down town."

The new business proved so successful that six months later Tony took in as partner a young architect from Chicago who had a little money and wanted to settle in a small town.

Six months after that the new firm of Regan & DeFoe, architects and builders, much to their surprise, won the contest for a new theater building in Morgantown, and were awarded the contract for building it. They were faced with the possibility either of going on the financial rocks or making a big profit. That was the summer after Tony graduated from the night high school at the age of twenty-eight, and less than three years after the wreck of the flyer.

X.

DURING these years Tony had visited Shanty-town regularly to see Mary Holley and his mother. But with each visit he realized that the breach between himself and his old associates was steadily widening. Under the influence of Judge Warren and his associates he had lost the speech and manner of Shanty-town. He had absorbed quickly and naturally the bearing, dress, and culture of the better class of city dwellers.

All this was anathema to his old neighbors. They no longer jeered openly this polished business man and associate of judges. But they never forgot that he was still practically a convict on parole, and they viewed what seemed to them his easy arrogance with sullen resentment. Little did they realize that he felt as uncomfortable in their presence as they did in his.

When he was with his mother she would watch him silently and when she thought he wasn't looking he would catch her wiping away furtive tears. His father and brother never stayed around the house when he was there.

But there was one great compensation in visiting Shanty-town, aside from the happiness of visiting the only two people there he cared anything about. His old lifelong day-dream had been forced more and more into the background by the busy rush of his Morgantown life. There was no time for day-dreaming there. And in that atmosphere his dream seemed strangely out of place.

But back in Shanty-town he could still sit by the railroad in front of his father's shanty and conjure up the dream river and mountain, the house with the white pillars, and the beautiful lady coming through the rose arch.

He tried to attribute this revivifying of

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his dream to the nearness of Mary, in whom he still told himself he had found his dream woman incarnate. But he couldn't always convince himself. There were times when she failed to yield the glamour that had adorned her that evening in the moonlight when he had first kissed her. Then he had looked upon her as a being of superior mental attainments and culture. His new sophistication found many shortcomings in her.

Yet he remained stoutly loyal. He assured himself that this was only temporary, the stultifying effects of Shanty-town on Mary. Once she was out in the real world with him, her mind would rebound. They'd grow to be real mental companions. What a pity it was they couldn't marry at once!

But they had agreed that they wouldn't marry till Tony's debt to the railroad was all paid, and that was a long way off yet.

All in all, Tony always felt a touch of smothered unhappiness when he returned from a visit to Mary.

And at the Morgantown end of his journey he found unhappiness too, an unhappiness he could not suppress. It had been a big part of his dream that he would some day be one among those sophisticated city people of breeding. But he seemed to be no nearer being one of them than ever, though now he lived among them, dressed, talked and acted like them. They still would not regard him as an equal. Nowhere was he really accepted socially. In Morgantown he was still a Shanty-town upstart, just as he was in Shanty-town. He had lost Shanty-town without gaining Morgantown.

Yet, Morgantown seemed superficially kind to him. He failed now to note any of the open enmity that had marked his first arrival there, the enmity passed on from Shanty-town by Mary's father, who latterly had seemed merely sullenly harmless. But Tony's police friend, Kane, when Tony made a remark along that line one day, tried to disillusion him.

" Don't you fool yourself, buddy," Kane told him. " The gang never forgets. They are just lyin' low."

And just on the eve of starting work on the new theater building that was to make or mar his career, just when it could do him the most harm, the blow fell.

A real estate man named Claxton, who had shown an inclination to be friendly to Tony recently, dropped in one afternoon.

" I've got a prospect over in Clairboro I'd like to have you see," he began. " He's thinking of moving to Morgantown, and maybe I can sell him a lot if I can show him an attractive plan for a house. Suppose you run over with me to-night and talk to him."

Tony was glad of the trip, both for business reasons and for pleasure. He seldom got away from Morgantown. This was a drive of fifteen miles through one of the pleasantest parts of the country. He had never been in Clairboro, and it proved to be a pretty little city.

Claxton's client seemed interested, and after a half hour's talk agreed to meet them in Morgantown in a few days and go further into the matter.

" What do you fellows say to a little poker game to-night?" he suggested as they were about to go. " I was going to join a few fellows myself over the other side of the village. They'd welcome you, I'm sure."

Claxton agreed with alacrity. Tony acquiesced, though inwardly somewhat reluctant. He felt he must be as agreeable as possible to a good prospect.

Clairboro was a widespread, scattering village, and the place of meeting proved to be some distance away. They had nearly reached it when Claxton's car began to sputter.

" Out of gas," he grunted. " Lucky we are near a gas station." He swung up to a pump only a few rods away. " Fill her up full. We got a long ways to go to-night," he told the boy at the pump, winking humorously at his companions in the car. " Suppose we can make Omaha by morning?" he asked solemnly.

Before the boy could answer, a man in uniform stepped up to the car and peered in. Tony recognized a State trooper he had frequently seen around Morgantown.

" Isn't this Mr. Regan?" the officer asked.

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"Yes," Tony acknowledged, suddenly feeling a vague alarm.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'll have to arrest you."

"Arrest me! What for?" Tony exclaimed.

"For leaving the county without permission of the court before completing the payment of your fine."

"Leaving the county! I haven't left the county!"

"Haven't ye? Well, ask anybody. This village lies on the county line. You're a mile on the wrong side o' the line right now, and from what I just heard meant to be a good many miles more away before morning."

In a flash Tony saw the whole thing. This was a carefully laid conspiracy to get him into trouble. And it meant a lot of trouble, too. There was still some two hundred dollars to go on his fine, for he had never yet paid more than the minimum five dollars a week in these years of struggle when every cent counted.

Probably they couldn't keep him in prison long. Perhaps conspiracy could be proven. But it would mean a protracted, bitter legal struggle which would cost his firm its theater contract and probably bankrupt it.

He decided that silence for the moment was the best policy; so he gave himself up peaceably and went back to Morgantown without voicing his suspicion against Claxton.

They were delayed while on the way, and it was long past midnight when they got back to Morgantown. So Tony made no attempt to get bail, but spent the rest of the night in jail.

At the informal hearing before Judge Warren in the morning, besides Tony's companions of the night before, he recognized several members of the inner ring who had doubtless come to gloat over his downfall.

The judge himself was gravely non-committal.

"Before we go any further," he said, after hearing the story of the trooper who had arrested Tony, "let us ascertain the status of the defendant's fine. You may look up the records, Mr. Clerk, and see what Mr. Regan yet owes."

The clerk, with an odd smile on his face, left the room for a moment.

"Mr. Regan owes nothing," announced the clerk when he returned. "He finished paying his fine yesterday by sending in to my office two hundred and ten dollars in a lump."

"Then there is evidently nothing against Mr. Regan. He can go where he pleases," pronounced the judge, still looking gravely non-committal.

XI.

TONY could have laughed at the mixture of crestfallen bewilderment and rage on the faces of the conspirators as they filed out, if he hadn't been equally amazed and puzzled himself. He had sent no money to the court the day before. He suspected some subtle trick on the judge's part.

When they were alone he asked him about it. The old man chuckled.

"I've been expecting some trick from those fellows for quite awhile," he explained. "When you told me over the phone yesterday where you were going last evening, and with whom, I thought there might be a nigger in the woodpile. So I looked up how much you owed, put the amount in an envelope, with a typed memo, and sent it in to the clerk as though it came from you. You can pay me back when you feel like it.

"We've caught 'em this time, but the fight's just begun. It isn't just you and that fellow Holley's old grudge. You've got a lot of real enemies among the soreheads that hated to see you get ahead so much faster than they and think you've got some secret inside pull. But the big fellows are really after me through you. This fall I'm up for reëlection, and the organization is starting a fight against indorsing me. So you see what we are both up against."

The next six months were the hardest of Tony's life. As the judge had predicted, he found himself a target of a political campaign of slander and conspiracy. His reputation was attacked in every direction. The story of the wreck of the flyer was distorted until the public believed he was a

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deliberate train wrecker allowed to go free by a venal judge. It was circulated that he had actually attempted flight that night of the poker-party conspiracy, believing a mysterious unnamed crime of his had been exposed, and that the judge had protected him by a crooked trick.

The judge went down to defeat under this campaign of vilification. He sold his property and moved East, depriving Tony of his only influential friend in Morgantown.

And the enemy tried their best to wreck Tony financially as well. Work on the theater was hampered by every possible trick. But here Tony and his partner, by eternal vigilance, thwarted them. They finished the work on time and made a handsome profit.

Then Tony told himself he was through with Morgantown and all that region of his boyhood. He would marry Mary Holley, and together they would go out into the world that had been denied him so long. He sold his share of the business, paid the railroad company the other four thousand dollars in promised settlement of damages to the flyer, settled a life annuity on his mother, and still had an ample sum left to do his tour of the world with Mary and finish his study of architecture as he had planned.

So Tony Regan returned to Shanty-town for the last time to get Mary. And here one final disappointment awaited him.

"I'm sorry, Tony," Mary said, after some beating about the subject. "But I've been doing a lot of thinking. I can't do it. You see, Tony, you've been growing away from me. You're not my kind any more. We'd just be awful unhappy."

At last Tony went out on the next stretch of his Trail o' Dreams, still alone.

XII.

WHEN Tony Regan returned again to America, two years later, he was still alone, more alone than ever. He had made many acquaintances, but no friends. His bitter experience in Morgantown had convinced him that a man of his origin could never be accepted among the kind of people to whom he felt most drawn. That feeling made him aloof and shy, unapproachable even with those who admired him and wanted to be friendly.

He had spent a year in wide travel and a year completing his study of architecture in Paris. Now he planned to settle in New York City and practice. But he had no friends in New York. Judge Warren was abroad now. For awhile they had corresponded, but for the present had lost track of each other.

He had intended to visit his mother at once; but on sending an advance letter home he had been shocked to learn that she had died only a month before in a distant city where she had gone in search of his father, who had again taken to wandering. Incidentally he learned that Mary Holley had married a traveling man and was living in California. So he never returned to Shanty-town.

Yes, Tony Regan was alone and bitterly unhappy and becoming cynical. His daydream still lingered in the background of his mind. He still saw the dream lady coming through the rose arch, smiling and lovely as ever.

But now the smile only mocked him.

One day when he was casting about for an opening in his profession, he saw an advertisement of a prize offer for the best design of a country home for a new-made millionaire. A site had already been selected in the highlands of the Hudson.

Tony thought it over. Why not? He had for a long time intended some day to reproduce the house of his dreams. But he had meant to build it to live in himself with the lady of his dream, when he found her. But he never would find her. He would never live in the dream palace himself. Why not build it for somebody else?

Next day Tony drove up the Hudson and inspected the proposed site. The Hudson in the highlands, like several other rivers he had seen in his travels, might have been his dream river. And the site of the proposed house was a little like his dream mountain. The dream house would fit there very nicely. He drew a rough sketch and returned to New York and fell to work with more eagerness than he had felt before in years.

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When the sketch and plan was done he felt that he had done his best, and that best was very good. He sent the material to the committee of award and impatiently awaited the result.

In due time his hope was dashed when he received his plan back with a curt note that left him gasping with amazement. He read:

> Is this a joke? If so we fail to see the point. Certainly, the home of Horace Doane is too distinctive and well known for you to hope to deceive this committee. A man of the ability you display in this copy should be capable of something of his own.

For a long time Tony Regan sat looking stupidly at this note and trying to think. Did this mean that his dream house actually existed after all, and that he had once seen it? Finally, trembling with excitement, he went to the Social Register and found that Horace Doane, of the well-known wealthy and socially prominent Doane family of New York, had a country home in the highlands, and it was only a few miles farther up than the proposed site of the prize house.

Tony drove up on the opposite side of the river from that on which the Doane estate lay. If this was to be his dream house he wanted to approach it first from the site from which he had always seemed to see it in fancy.

As he neared a point opposite where the Doane house should stand he was trembling and weak from excitement. It could not be true.

Then the car swept around a bend and a cry escaped him. There it was! Tony was hardly able to order the driver to stop. For a long time he sat staring across a broad, sparkling river, up a green mountain, to a fairy house with slender white pillars, arched windows, and green gables.

At length he climbed out of the car and ordered the driver to return to New York. Somehow it seemed certain he was going to stay here. He clambered down to the shore, found a boat and boatman, and presently he was across the dream river climbing a winding road up the face of the mountain.

He did not remember distinctly ever seeing this road in his dream, yet it seemed vaguely familiar. Every step of the way he felt as if some time he had been there before.

At length he entered a great gate and was soon standing in a terraced garden in front of the house—the garden of his dreams. Yes—there was even the bordered path and the rose arch at the end. He stood staring at it in a trance. He half expected to see the dream lady come through it and then to have the dream vanish.

"Were you looking for some one?"

It was a musical, girlish voice. He could see some one moving in the shrubbery beyond the arch. Then Tony's senses reeled.

Through the rose arch walked the dream lady!

He rubbed his eyes, but she was still there—just as she had been in his dreams, still young after nearly twenty-five years. Now she had stopped, and she too was staring at him in amazement.

She half turned suddenly a little pale.

"I beg your pardon," she gasped. "Why—I—"

She stopped and continued to stare.

Then Tony found his voice.

"Why, I've seen you before!" he exclaimed. "I've always known you."

"And I've always known you," she answered. "Who are you?"

"Tony Regan is my name," he told her. "I'm a nobody from a little prairie place called Shanty-town. I've never been here before, but all my life I've dreamed I was here with you."

Presently they found themselves sitting side by side on a rustic seat, and Tony was pouring out the story of his life while she listened entranced.

"How wonderful!" she exclaimed. "And you've made yourself what you are now, and we've met at last."

Tony's heart thrilled. Somehow he had always known his dream lady would not despise him because he came from Shanty-town.

"But who are you?" he asked. "Do you live here? But you couldn't even have been born when I first began to see you in my dream as a grown woman."

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"No. I live in the next place up the road. I'm Genevieve Forester. We've always been great friends of Mr. Doane and are running back and forth all the time. Oh, I know! I look just like the pictures of my mother when she was my age. You must have been here when you were a little boy. Mr. Doane's little boy was alive then. Mother has told me how sorry she was for him because he had no mother and she used to come to see him every day."

"Tell me about the Doanes," Tony asked.

"Mr. Doane was an artist. He planned this place and built it and brought his bride here. She died when their little boy was born. Then the little boy was drowned when he was four years old. He wandered down the road to the river alone one day. They never even found his body. Mr. Doane never got over it. It made an old man of him. Let's go in and see him. He'll be interested in your story. Maybe he'll remember something that will help explain it."

A little later Tony was introduced to an old man with a fine face marked with suffering and a bent figure that must once have been tall and athletic.

The moment he came into the room Horace Doane stared hard at Tony and looked startled and perplexed. Then as Genevieve Forester spoke Tony's name he started violently and sank suddenly into a chair as though he were faint.

"Tony Regan? Did you say Tony Regan? Then you've come! You've come! Little Monty! Come here, my boy!"

He held out a trembling hand.

Tony, believing the old man was insane, obeyed reluctantly and stood beside Mr. Doane's chair, holding one of his thin hands while the other tugged at his pocket.

Presently it brought forth a worn, soiled letter.

"Read that, Tony Regan. I thought it was a hoax and didn't tell about it. God forgive me, but it was true. The moment I saw you I knew it was true."

The letter was illiterate and brief. It read:

> MR. MONTGOMERY DOANE:
>
> I'm going die and must confess. The nurse write this. I can't write. My husband run away when my baby was little. I go to Morgantown, but didn't find him. Then I hear he is in New York. I go there, but my baby die. I work for you. Your baby got no mother. I love him. One day I stole him and left his hat in river so you think he's drown. My husband come back, and I make him believe your baby my baby. Nobody knows but me. Find Tony Regan. He is your son, Montgomery. This is true, and I am sorry. ANGELA REGAN.

For a long time Montgomery Doane, no longer Tony Regan, clung to the hand of his weeping father while the years readjusted themselves in his mind and his dream world slipped into reality.

Then he was conscious that a soft little hand had slipped into his free hand and Genevieve, his dream lady come to life, was weeping, too.

"Now I know why I thought I'd seen you before," she whispered. "It was your father's picture that used to hang on the wall then. You look just like it. I'd almost forgotten the picture, but all my life it's been my ideal."

"I hope the man won't be too far short of the ideal now that our dreams have come true," whispered Montgomery Doane.

THE END

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Mix and Serve

By EDGAR FRANKLIN

Author of "A Noise in Newboro," "Where Was I?" etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

HENRY WELLS is out motoring with Burnstown's snappiest widow when his fiancée drives by and misunderstands his attentions to the clinging woman. She does not know that Henry's sole motive is to sell her real estate. Meanwhile, Henry's ambitious partner, John Stannard, closes a mammoth development deal contingent on the sale of a particular piece of property which the owner wants to be rid of before entering into the larger realty plan. Stannard reads a "go-getter" lecture to Henry. He tells him he must join clubs, attend parties, mix generally with the socially elect of Burnstown, and in particular make himself agreeable to wealthy women who are prospective clients. Henry attends a studio party that night, and Stannard beams as he thinks that his partner is at last "mixing." Against his better judgment Henry whispers compliments to an unattractive woman he believes is single and wealthy. The woman suddenly takes offense at his remarks and withdraws indignantly. Stannard is furious. Henry realizes that he has used the wrong ingredients in his mixing and once more put the firm in wrong in Burnstown.

CHAPTER IV *(continued).*

THE GAY PLACE.

HENRY WELLS stared at his partner in puzzlement. Was this a mental condition that went with that particular set? Henry grinned faintly at the notion.

"I'm glad it strikes you funny!" John hissed. "You're good, you are!"

"Aha?" Henry said uninterestedly.

"Donaldson!" Mr. Stannard choked.

"What?"

"*Donaldson!* The only real competitor we have in town—the only man we have any real cause to fear," the senior partner pursued emotionally. "Why did you have to pick on *his* wife?"

Henry sat up patiently and smiled.

"His wife? Never laid eyes on the lady in my life, so far as I can recall," he said. "Yes, I did, too! She's a big, husky—"

"Well, the girl you insulted—the girl he just carted home in a fit of hysterics—

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that's Donaldson's new wife!" Mr. Stannard panted. "And he thinks the sun rises for her particular benefit, and he'd kill any man who even looked cross-eyed at her!"

CHAPTER V.

PROGRESS.

GIVEN the same circumstances, at almost any other moment of his adult life, Henry Wells would have blanched, would have leaped to his feet, would have given any one of a dozen other manifestations of profound amazement and chagrin. Just now—since his incorrigible mind, even at this second, had roamed briefly back to Miriam—he merely opened his eyes a little wider and nodded and muttered:

"Y' don't say?"

"I—I—" Mr. Stannard gasped.

"Anyway, you're crazy—you don't know what you're talking about," Henry pursued, and shaded a dreary yawn. "That is not Donaldson's wife; his wife's a big, husky woman, about his own age. This chicken was—"

"Listen!" sizzled from the senior partner. "Donaldson's wife divorced him five years ago. I don't know who this kid was originally, but she's his wife now. Donaldson turned up with her last week, when he'd been away two months. She's twenty-one, and he's forty-nine. Now dope out for yourself what you've done in insulting her!"

Henry nodded absently.

"That's right—she did divorce him. Give you my word, I'd forgotten all about it, and—"

"Henry, this pose isn't going to relieve you of any of the blame," Mr. Stannard said. "I don't know what you did to that girl, but she made for Donaldson, all primed for hysterics, and he got her into an upper room just in time to avoid breaking up the party.

"Now he's taken her home—and she looks like a mean little devil, capable of hanging on to a spite. I couldn't get to him, but Cossar says he was promising everything for you from plain murder to burning at the stake! You've made an enemy."

"Sorry. I did nothing but what you suggested. I made love to her in—er—a gentle and repressed way, and—"

"You must have! They tell me she's just out of a convent school, too, and finicky as— Well, what's done is done. No help for it."

"That's right," said Henry, cheerily enough. "And if you'd listened to me in the first place it wouldn't have happened. I told you I didn't feel—"

"Say!" the senior partner exploded. "You've made one break, and people are talking about you. Now shake yourself together and mix. And you act pretty, or I'll wring your neck!"

"Bah!" sighed the junior partner, but looked around, nevertheless. "Losing your best girl, John?"

"Huh? Ida? She's right here waiting for me to—"

"Oh, no, she's not! She dancing with the tall sheik again," Henry chuckled mirthlessly. "Keep an eye on him, Johnny. That's Walker, the new lawyer, and they do say he eats 'em alive."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Mr. Stannard said blackly.

"So you tend to your own fences and I'll tend to mine," the junior partner concluded as he strolled away—aye, strolled away in the same unreal, nightmare fashion that had marked his first crossing of the floor. He was sinking again too—not even one-quarter of the conscious Henry Wells was really attending Wallace Gower's party. Yet it behooved that quarter to do its poor best in the interest of the firm. Henry gathered his forces as well as might be and once more cast about him.

Many more people had arrived since his last survey of the party. The place was growing quite crowded. Along the wall the inevitable line of the somewhat neglected was taking shape.

Henry considered them numbly. Since, with Miriam lost, all things in petticoats looked alike to him, just so that they were white and respectable and apparently prosperous enough to be in the market for Ridge property some day, it might be as

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well to devote himself to one or two of these plainer and more elderly ladies.

Or it might not. He didn't know. He didn't care. They were nearest to him just now, and that was plenty. Henry mustered a smile and bent over a hawk-nosed lady of fifty with a seductive:

"Why in the world aren't *you* dancing?"

He was rewarded by an astonished, pleased little sound—something that was not quite a simper and still approximated that rather forlorn manifestation. The lady rose quite readily, too, and Henry was just about to encircle her with a more or less tender arm, when a sudden and somewhat distressing light burst upon him.

Where most of them glittered, this lady of his careless choice displayed not one single gem. And little as Henry knew about women's clothes, he did know that this plain evening gown was decidedly inexpensive. Still more, at swift second glance he perceived the lady to be of the cantankerous type, of the type to whom one might feed lurid language until one's throat gave out, without ever selling one dollar's worth.

Well, that would never do! Henry was here for business and not for pleasure. It was rather awful, of course, but he seemed to have picked the most unpromising prospect in the whole room—and, whatever the interest of the firm, Henry had no idea of doing any bootless mixing this night.

"I beg pardon," he said hastily, and stepped back. "I thought you were—you will forgive me, won't you?"

And he fled, making straight for the lady in pink, fourth down the line, who wore what—although it may not have been—looked like the Koh-i-noor; and as he fled, the other and more normal three-quarters of Henry Wells awoke briefly and with a terrific shock, for the first lady's head had gone back with a dumfounded jerk, and her hard, dark eyes were blazing.

Just an instant she regarded Henry Wells, who stood all but gaping at her; then she turned and walked haughtily away.

And Henry, suddenly chilled and sickened with horror before the realization of his own unutterable boorishness, hurried after her, crying:

"Oh—I—say! Please! I never intended—that is, I do beg your pardon most humbly for—"

He collided violently with a dancing couple. He heard a pretty girl cry out in pain, saw her raise one foot from the floor and keep it raised; he noted hazily that the powerful young man with her was tilting on the verge of extremely elemental action as he glowered at Henry and opened his lips—and then restrained himself and led away his limping partner to the rhythm of Henry's profuse apologies.

The offended lady had quite vanished.

Young Mr. Wells drew one deep, shaky breath and moved back toward the one with the crown jewels. She was fat and apparently impressionable; she seemed delighted as Henry piloted her across the floor, down the far side.

After a fashion, too, he conversed with her as they danced, but most of his attention on this last lap was reserved for John Stannard. Mr. Stannard, putting the thing mildly, was acting in an odd way.

It appeared that John, red of face, was doing his best to impersonate a faithful puppy who has broken the leash and decided to follow his master through the dance. He trotted up to Henry's side and beckoned.

Now he had been shaken off for a moment; now he appeared again, beckoning once more; and although he had been shaken off even again, he caught up once more just as Henry was about to relinquish his charge.

"May I—ah—speak to you at once, Henry?" he asked sweetly.

And he bowed his apology to the plump lady and laid a firm hand on Henry Wells and led him hence. Directly into the most remote of the little alcoves did he lead Henry; and there in the roughest, the most discourteous and least considerate way he thrust Henry violently against the wall and panted directly into his face in a low, tense voice:

"Say! What the hell's the matter with you?"

"What?"

"Do you know any more ways to insult women?" the senior partner gulped.

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Henry shook his head sadly.

"I know, Johnny. That break I made was unfortunate. I admit it, fast enough. But I'm so absent-minded to-night that—"

"I'll say it was unfortunate! You know who that was, don't you?"

"I never saw the lady before."

"Well, that was Mrs. Parker Halliday—that was Jim Bentick's twin sister."

"Huh?" gurgled Henry.

"Yes! The widowed sister of the political boss and real owner of this whole county! The sister of a man who could hound us, or any one else, out of the State if he felt like it. She sold out her home in New York and came to Burnstown to look after Jim's home, and if she's worth one penny she's worth a million dollars!"

"Oh!" gasped Henry.

"I was talking to her before you got here—before you got here! She was interested in Ridge property *then!*" the senior partner pursued, in a strange minor whine that might have been the death song of some savage tribe. "And *you* go to work and slap her face—or whatever it was you did—and—"

"Wait, Johnny!" young Mr. Wells pleaded. "I'll find her and apologize quick. I'll explain that I'm—I'm nervous and not myself, and I'll explain to Bentick, too, and then I'll—"

"You needn't bother!" Stannard laughed harshly. "She's no longer here. She had Jim take her home. I managed to get to him and I tried to apologize for you. He just looked me over and said he'd consider it and that possibly he'd listen to your apologies later—and possibly he wouldn't."

"What does that mean?"

"Heaven only knows! Means that you have antagonized another of the only five or six men in town I'd give my right hand not to antagonize. Lord!" moaned Mr. Stannard, and caressed his doubtless aching forehead for a moment. "And they can go on playing that music!"

There was a pause, during which the unfeeling music went right on.

Henry avoided his partner's eye.

"I'll go home now!" he said thinly.

"What? You will not!" the senior partner said savagely. "You'll stick around now and do all you can to counteract the impression you've made. People are talking about you, idiot. If you don't work your head off making yourself positively adorable to everything that 'll listen to you, I'll— Hey! There's Gloria Clay!"

"Aha?" said Henry, with a slight start.

"See—over there! Young Dingman's just leaving her—see his black hair? There will be a crowd around her inside of two minutes. Horn in quick!"

"I—I—think—"

"No, you don't, Henry!" said Mr. Stannard, and fierce fingers tightened mercilessly on Henry's arm. "But you've got to muster brains enough to grasp what I'm telling you. Beat it over there and start to work selling her Finch's house."

He was large and there was something in his glinting eye which Henry had never seen there before. Be it not said that Henry feared his partner; he did not; but there was that about Mr. Stannard which suggested that cold-blooded murder was tingling in his finger tips—and Henry somehow found himself feeling that he was responsible even now for damage enough to Wallace Gower's party.

"Well—"

"Don't argue! Go!" clicked from Mr. Stannard. "I can't stand here all night talking it over. Make it snappy. Hop in with both fists and never stop till you've got the whole thing nailed down. Ida's waiting for me. Git!"

"No, she isn't," Henry corrected with an hysterical choke. "She stood over there for awhile, but now she's dancing with—"

John was gone. John had departed at high speed, too, and with great strides, and his long arms were swinging like the arms of an angry gorilla. Plainly, John's whole attention was upon that certain sandy youth who clasped Ida firmly and looked whole volumes of romance down upon her as they danced; and Henry smiled and turned away. He did not wish to see it when, or if, it happened. Between two partners, he fancied, the firm of Stannard & Wells was in a fair way to break up the Gower party before they had finished.

So, then, how about Gloria? He had no wish to talk to Gloria, either; they had

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driven back to the office in the very coolest way that afternoon; but it seemed to be fate. Ah, young Stanley Foster, with his slick hair and his hypnotic eyes, was making for the place beside Gloria, wasn't he?

Henry quickened his pace and reached it rather less than one second ahead of Mr. Foster, who stood and glared blackly down upon him and observed:

"I *think* that Mrs. Clay beckoned me, Wells!"

"You are wrong, Foster. She beckoned me," Henry responded serenely and met his eye without flinching.

Just here an angel appeared in the form of a fluffy little thing who caught Mr. Foster's arm and bore him triumphantly away. Henry turned and gazed upon his newest victim, and the victim returned his gaze with that stare of deep friendliness one ordinarily reserves for bill collectors, book agents, and the like. No warm light was in Gloria's magnificent eyes—no warm smile lurked about her lips for Henry.

Mr. Wells just caught a sigh. She was no less than exquisite just now, with her bare, perfect shoulders and her wonderful hair; and still she made the same appeal to Henry that a gate post or an iron statue might have made.

These last minutes, for some queer reason, Miriam had been floating before him, scorning him, loathing him, and he was going deeper and deeper and deeper, and he was beginning to suspect what might be the terrible truth—*he could not conquer himself!*

"Well, if you find me so very depressing, why are you sitting here?" Mrs. Clay asked, with some point.

"You? Depressing!" Henry echoed in horror.

"Don't be absurd! Why did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Race Stanley over here and beat him. I wanted to talk to him. He's quite alive, you know."

"And I'm not?"

"Candidly, do you think you are?" the girl smiled faintly.

Henry sat up. Well—cost him what the effort might, if he were to make any headway, the time to begin was now!

"Gloria," he said, and allowed his voice to tremble a little, "I offended you this afternoon. I'm sorry! I—"

"Bosh!" said Gloria, and looked away annoyedly. "There's something you want to say, Henry. What is it?"

"In other words, say it and get out?" Henry smiled bitterly.

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Clay, and her little smile was insolent and slightly bored.

Henry sat up a little. He knew neither anger nor disappointment at this smile; poor, lifeless creature that he was, he knew only that his lesson must be spoken.

"Only that it occurred to me, in regard to the house you're buying, that—"

"Oh, Johnson's? I'll stop at the office about noon to-morrow and leave a check, if you'll have the contracts ready. Anything else?"

"Yes, indeed! You see, I thought afterward that there are a good many points about the house you're occupying that might suit you better than Johnson's."

"Well, there are not."

"But—"

"I've decided on Johnson's house," Mrs. Clay advised him, with real irritation. "Why in the world do you pick *this* place to talk business? Or *can't* you talk anything else?"

"Gloria, I—"

"Oh, here comes Georgie Dingman for me!" cried Mrs. Clay. And Henry was alone once more.

Well, he had failed. What of that? He rose listlessly and sauntered down that side of the room where big windows gave upon the dusky lawn, revealing Chinese lanterns swinging here and there. Of course John would be annoyed, but—

"Where is she?" John demanded, apparently rising through the floor.

"What? Oh, she's dancing with Dingman just now, and—"

"I'm not talking about *her!* I'm talking about Ida!"

"Oh?" sighed Henry. "Give it up."

"Well, don't give it up! Give me a hand here, Henry, because I need it! Look around for her. I can't find her! She was

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dancing with that snide little hound of a Patterson—and then they both disappeared. I won't have her roaming that garden with him. I'll wind my fingers around that scurvy whelp's throat and—aha! *Aha!* There they are!" cried the senior partner.

He may not actually have somersaulted through the open window, yet this was the effect he gave in departing. At any rate he was out of doors and thudding heavily across the turf now—and be hanged to him and his tinny little romance! Henry Wells sighed and strolled on, looking for refuge and isolation.

This latter he would have for a few minutes, or begin shrieking! The cast-iron depression was closing in on Henry like a giant vise; only a little while ago he had fancied himself at the very depths of misery; now he understood that he had broken through that level and was miles and miles below.

Even physically he was uncomfortable. His head ached; he was weary in every bone; the dry, dusty heat of the place had parched his throat until it felt like so much hot sandpaper. Here were heavy curtains; Wallace seemed to have thousands of yards of drapery in his near-exotic establishment.

Henry pushed aside the curtains and entered a more dimly illuminated area, which was the smallish dining room Wallace had contrived in his reconstruction.

There were signs that the sideboard was being prepared for a raid; farther beyond, crockery was clinking faintly, too; but at just this spot there was only Arthur Gower, just discarding a cigarette and looking rather preoccupied.

"Hello!" he grinned absently. "Been superintending the hired waiters, you know. I guess that's all out of the way now."

"I want a drink!" said Henry Wells.

"A—*what?*" gasped the less opulent Gower, and suddenly beamed. "Why, Henry, that's the most intelligent remark I ever heard you make! Henry, I never had the least idea that—why, Henry, you don't know how proud I am of my employer in this wonderful moment! Here, by all means! And let me tell you this, Hen: this *is* pre-war stuff!"

He proffered a silver flask, with a hand that all but trembled. Henry grinned and shook his head.

"No, I want a drink of water."

"Water? When—"

"Never was a hooch-hound, Art; you know that," Henry said patiently. "The only drink I ever took in my life was some brandy they gave me for a cold when I was about fifteen—and that nearly killed me! Where's the tap or the ice-water pitcher?"

"What's the matter with the punch?" asked Mr. Gower, disappointedly, and indicated the big bowl.

"What's in it?"

"Eh? Water, apparently, and ice—and pineapple and oranges and a couple of quarts of orange juice, too, I judge," Arthur reported, after a curious inspection.

"Booze, too? I don't like it, you know—on the level."

"One moment. I'll give you an expert opinion," said Mr. Gower, and reached for a cup. And then, having poured its contents into himself, he smacked his lips and gazed thoughtfully at the ceiling. "Lord! That's cold!" he muttered. "That's plain liquid ice—don't like anything chilled as much as that. No hooch here, Hen. May possibly be a dash of something, but even that's doubtful. Wally's cellar isn't overstocked, you know. Brrr! That's like something you'd scoop up at the North Pole!"

"Well, that's exactly the stuff I'm looking for!" Henry cried thirstily, and reached for a cup of his own.

"Help yourself! I've got to go on," Arthur observed cheerily, and hurried away.

Nor was that first cupful anything less than heavenly! Henry blinked gratefully and secured another icy cupful; and as he set this one down empty he sighed the most genuine kind of relief. The man who crawls up to the water hole, after days in the desert, knows some such satisfaction as this.

Although—although—Henry frowned in some perplexity and swallowed.

As a matter of fact, now that several seconds had gone, he had an impression that he had been drinking liquid fire! It

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wasn't possible, was it, that the stuff was mostly alcohol, after all? No, plainly it was not; Arthur, even if he did happen to be an employee of the firm, knew liquor; and in any case there would have been a more pronounced taste. There had been a suggestion of ginger, along with the other flavors; probably they had put in too much of that. At all events, that impression of liquid fire had passed now.

And so, since it was soothingly quiet in here, Henry Wells dropped into one of the leather chairs for a moment of relaxation, leaning back and sighing wearily.

Why did he go on? He was all through! He knew that he was through, and when a man knows that about himself he is usually right. Miriam he had known as a potent factor of his life this last year or two; he might as well admit now that she was his whole life, or that she had been, and that without her there ceased to be any real Henry. He did not blame her. She was a girl of astonishingly high ideals. But that didn't alter the fact that Henry was finished!

Or—was he? Was this any frame of mind to be entertained by a man who really did come of fighting stock? Was he to collapse like a pricked balloon and go to pieces for all time, simply because a girl had jilted him? Was it really impossible for him to conquer himself and return to the normal?

Henry Wells clasped his hands tight together, scowled at them, and pondered the point. Henry, further, clenched his teeth tight together and, all soundlessly, cried out to those unconquerable reserve forces which lie, however deeply hidden, in every real man. In these terrific two or three minutes, it may be concluded, Henry Wells was fighting for his very soul—and now, with a great gasp, he relaxed suddenly.

No! Ten million times, *no!* He'd be eternally damned if ever he'd admit such an impossibility!

Neither Miriam Benton nor all the rest of the women on earth could lick Henry Wells! He squared his shoulders; suddenly he smiled broadly. He stood erect and, almost wonderingly, flexed his muscles, there in the solitude of the dining room. It was a realization no less than astounding, to be sure, and yet he knew for the most perfect certainty that life was back in him! He could feel it racing gloriously through every vein.

It was, in fine, Henry's full belief that he had conquered himself at last!

CHAPTER VI.

REVIVED!

HENRY was almost giddy with the sheer joy of victory.

He closed his eyes a moment and swayed a trifle, hardly able to believe that this new sensation of power was quite real; but the coursing life only quickened its pace. It seemed to be coming in a series of delightful little surges, each a shade more energetic than its predecessor. He glanced at the punch bowl inquiringly; then he laughed and shook his head. It was good to know that nothing in that concoction had helped him reach this frame of mind; had he accepted Arthur's flask, for example, whatever his other emotions, he would have known shame in this triumphant moment. As matters stood, he had won the fight alone! He wanted to cheer aloud!

This impulse he controlled without difficulty, and grinned about the empty room. Positively, he was in shape at this moment to get out and mix, and that for almost the very first time in his life. So violent had been the upheaval attending Henry's battle, that all the old timidities had gone into the discard together. He was not only his own man, and fully able to mingle with members of his kind; he actually wanted to do just that!

And there was really nothing but a curtain between him and his new desires; the chatter out there was rising even above the din of the orchestra. Henry permitted himself just one laugh, aloud. Then he twitched his collar into place and had raised one hand to thrust aside the draperies with a sweeping, graceful motion when his attention was caught by the figure which stumbled from outer darkness in through the window.

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A strange, bent figure it was, too, panting and moaning and, with both hands, holding its right eye; and the top of its head was strangely like the top of the head of that Mr. Patterson who had so lately been dancing with Ida Mears!

"Oh!" it said thickly; and again: "Oh!"

"Trouble?" Henry inquired.

"Got a piece of raw—raw beef?" the other countered.

"Curious, but I haven't such a thing about me," Henry laughed, with glib readiness. "Usually carry around a side or two of beef when I go to a party, too, but I haven't a pound on me to-night. Can't you eat it cooked? Or won't something else do just as well? The eats are about due, I think."

The stricken one straightened up. He did not smile at Henry's persiflage.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he choked. "The other half of the firm, hey?"

"Eh?"

"Listen!" said Mr. Patterson. "You're going to do business alone after this, Wells!"

"Why?"

"I'm going to have your damned partner sent away for twenty years! Look at this eye!"

His hands were removed. He moaned again, shudderingly. Henry Wells stood petrified with admiration.

"Why, what an absolutely magnificent black eye!" he said softly.

"What?"

"I don't blame you for wanting to show it, Patterson! I give you my word, I never saw an eye just like that before. It isn't possible that my dear old partner did all that?"

"He never would have, if—if I'd had warning," the other stated, with wan ferocity. "He came up and grabbed me by the throat with one hand and hit with the other before—"

"He did that with just one hand?" Henry gasped. "No club or anything like that?"

"He—"

"With just *one* wallop?" Henry persisted.

"Yes! He—"

"Well, well, well! And Johnny's wasted all these years in the real estate business, too. Why, give him three months and a good trainer and I'll back him to go out and mop up any heavyweight in the country, if this is what he can do extempore. Tell me more about this!"

Mr. Patterson straightened up.

"You're funny, aren't you?" he inquired. "Well, you're about forty pounds lighter than he is, Wells, and for two cents I'd—"

"Yes? What would you do for two cents, Patterson?" Henry asked sweetly and briskly, and without ever having intended to ask such a thing. "Is there something you feel just like starting?"

Mr. Patterson caught his breath and backed away.

"I—think your firm's gone crazy!" he stated, irrelevantly. "I think you're a pair of—"

"Because if there is, Patterson, you'd better write out a tag and tie it in your buttonhole, so they'll know where to send what's left. Well?" said the once peaceful and retiring Henry Wells.

"Hank!" the other said brokenly, and so changed the subject entirely. "Be a good sport and find me a hunk of beef!"

"Go find it yourself!" Henry retorted, with a derisive laugh. "Kitchen's out back there."

Mr. Patterson tottered away. Mr. Wells squared his shoulders and again laughed, more loudly, more exultantly. He might not have been able to analyze or to define the process with any great nicety; yet somehow, in these last minutes, the new Henry understood that he had proved himself.

And now to the main business of the evening, which was mixing! Henry returned to the curtain, and this time did sweep it aside with a graceful gesture; and for a few moments he stood and considered the scene, with a smile wherein the bright benevolence was not untouched with mild wonder.

The party, he sensed, was turning wild! The orchestra had been dragged from its concealment and was banging away feverishly under the personal leadership of Mr.

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Wallace Gower himself, who had somewhere acquired a tin kettle, which he used for a hat, and the leg of a chair which he used for a baton.

Shrill shrieks of merriment were upon the air; smoke of countless cigarettes seemed to be gathering above; and as for some of the dancing, near at hand—um—well, Henry had never seen just that kind of dancing in Burnstown before, but it would do Burnstown no real harm to come up to date. Two or three elderly ladies, within his vision, were looking properly shocked. Henry laughed once more. "Fossils, y' know! Fossils!"

Coming this way was one of them—a male fossil, incidentally—dancing with a young lady who, unless appearances were misleading, would be a fossil herself in a few years unless some one interfered. She wore spectacles and long hair, which was done ever so neatly. Now, in point of fact, this male relic was none other than Julius P. Hagerford, president of the First National Bank; but that was no reason for permitting him to dance with a young thing and contaminate her with his moldy ideas of propriety! Nix!

"Greetings!" Henry cried gayly. "Show you how we cut in! This is how! Shake a bye-bye to him, girly!"

His fine, big laugh echoed as they swirled away from the frowning, astonished gentleman. Gentle mirth, in fact, kept on shaking Henry as he looked down mischievously at what was unquestionably a young girl, but still felt like a very limp bag of meal.

"I have rescued you! What? What?" he observed.

"Have you really?"

"I certainly have, little one," Henry chuckled. "How come a little pippin like you, dancing with one so aged?"

The bag of meal began to breathe quite rapidly. Behind the spectacles light eyes flashed, too.

"If you please," said their owner, and her voice might have been the breeze from an ice floe, "I prefer to dance with my father!"

"You do?" Henry said merrily. "Well, what a little home body it is! Where's the papa, honeybunch?"

"I was dancing with him when you—you did that!"

"Oho?" said Mr. Wells. "And you can look me in the eye and tell me honestly that you wish to be taken back?"

"If you'll release me, I can find my own way back!" the young woman said, quite emotionally.

"Oh, but that's not manners!" Henry laughed. "There he stands, just as we left him! Come, then, my child!"

He headed once more for the gentleman, upon whose cheeks two bright red spots had appeared. Gayly indeed did Henry swing the maiden back toward the parental arms, and as they came nearer a new and bright idea flashed upon Henry—an idea quite in keeping with this very gay occasion. There chanced to be half a dozen couples grouped just about Mr. Hagerford.

"Everybody!" shouted Henry Wells, as he relinquished his burden and pointed at her father. "Ring-around-a-rosy!"

Instantly, too, did these brilliant, merry folk gather his meaning. They spread out. They joined hands, then, and danced about Mr. Hagerford. One pert little creature darted forward and thrust a pink paper helmet upon Mr. Hagerford's dignified brow, pulling it down rakishly over one eye. Another pert little creature pushed Henry himself toward Mr. Hagerford, palpably giving that gentleman the impression that Henry had been responsible for the helmet, and—just then, with amazing suddenness, Henry was jerked bodily from the circle.

John Stannard had done that by grasping Henry's wrist with his capable left hand. His right held fast to the arm of pretty little Ida, who was pouting. With no ceremony whatever, John dragged them aside.

"That's the stuff!" he hissed viciously. "Go on picking them like that, Henry! Why didn't you poke his ribs or slap his bald spot, you poor half-wit?"

"Have a care!" Henry laughed. "Them's dangerous words, Johnny!"

"Because we don't have to keep on the right side of any bank, you know!" Mr. Stannard went on, eyes glittering feverish-

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ly. "*We* never have to ask favors or borrow money! They've only got three of our notes now, and they're all on demand, at that! Go back and kick him a couple of times and then jump on his daughter's spectacles and—"

"John, old thing, you're simply tiresome!" said Henry Wells, the self-conquered, as he reached out and acquired a slim lady in black satin, momentarily alone. "Tiresome, old thing—tiresome!"

Picking them blindly, apparently, was the best way, too, Henry reflected.

Here was a distinctly good-looking person of thirty or thereabout, good-natured enough to be laughing up at him, prosperous enough to have several pieces of chaste, rich jewelry in sight — obviously, a congenial soul; obviously a resident; obviously, therefore, a prospect!

"Well, now that we've been properly introduced, I'm glad that we met!" Henry remarked.

The musical laugh rewarded him again.

"You're one of the Lesters — I don't know which one," Henry pursued.

"I'm the one you never met," the lady advised him. "I'm Cousin Mary, and this is the first time in ten years that I've been in Burnstown."

"But now that you're here, you're here to stay?"

"Oh, no. I'm just here to go—to-morrow afternoon. I drove up to get Helen and Grace and their mother. The car started down this morning on the ten-twenty freight."

"Car?"

"With the furniture. Oh, you didn't know that they were moving?"

"I hadn't heard a thing about it."

"Dear me, yes! They're coming down to Philadelphia to live permanently now; they've bought the house next to ours."

"And so," mused Henry, with a tinge of sadness that was perfectly real, "I shall never see you again?"

"Not unless you come to Philadelphia," the lady laughed.

Thus another prospect, so to speak, died in Henry's very arms! He was improving, however. He did not steer this lady to the nearest window, merely push her out headlong and then continue his search for ladies possibly interested in Ridge property. He danced, perhaps a trifle less enthusiastically, until the music stopped; and then another merry young man caught up and took the lady from him—and Henry paused and dabbed his moist brow.

It was infernally hot in here. Most of them did not seem to feel it so much, but Henry did. It was so extremely hot that Henry knew a slight but distinct dizziness and uncertainty—so hot that it even affected his vision a bit, causing the dancers to blur as they bobbed around.

But his high spirits were not affected, thank fortune. In conquering himself, Henry Wells had done one of the most thorough jobs of his life. A really wild elation surged through him, as he gloated upon his victory. It had been a dreadful struggle, all alone there in the dining room, but never again would any woman, any combination of circumstances, be able to cast Henry Wells into the depths. This he knew.

He considered the gathering again. The party was, in cold fact, becoming quite scandalous. From the way they were carrying on, one must have thought that some of these people were plain drunk and disorderly! Fact! Not good old John Stannard, though. John, over there, was scolding little Ida Mears, without an attempt at concealment and as energetically as if they'd been married ten years and were home in their own sitting room.

What an ass—what a brute—John was! Henry's blood simmered for a few seconds. Ida was nothing to Henry, of course. On the other hand, she was just a helpless little girl, half cowed before that long, waggling jaw of Stannard's. Henry laughed harshly. Well, if he couldn't avenge her in one way, he could lend her a hand in another. He stepped blithely toward the only couple apparently not attuned to the occasion.

With the suddenness of a sledge-driven wedge, he came between John Stannard and his victim!

"Enough of that, my lad!" he laughed. "This is my dance."

"Huh?" snarled Mr. Stannard. "Say, *you've* got no—"

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"Away with him, men!" Henry cried gayly. "Put him in irons!"

And he seized the tender maiden and whirled her away, and he laughed quite uproariously as he did this, too, and clasped Ida the tighter; and Ida, albeit she owned a certain constitutional inability to remain wholly unflattered at such a move, seemed still a little frightened.

"Henry!" she protested.

"My child!" breathed Henry.

"Why did you do it?"

"To save you from his wanton brutality, of course. What's the matter with Johnny to-night—got an ingrowing grouch?"

"Oh, he's so jealous!" Ida shivered. "I'm afraid of him! Why, he followed Danny Patterson and me into the garden and he—he was perfectly furious! For a moment I thought he was actually going to strike Danny. I ran! Henry, he—he wouldn't do a thing like that?"

"No—no!" Henry protested, and smiled brilliantly at the distant, black-visaged Mr. Stannard, just at that second engulfed in the crowd as he glowered after the pair.

"And he gets worse all the time."

"He needs a lesson," Mr. Wells opined. "We'll give him one."

"How, Henry?" Ida asked, confidingly.

"We'll hide out on him!" Henry chuckled. "We'll let him spend half an hour or so looking for us, and when he does find us I'll just hand him a few logical bits of advice and make him see what an idiot he was to feel that he had to look for us at all. Get it?"

"Why, I see what you mean. But—"

"Let me attend to this," the gay Henry laughed. "Here, by gosh!"

He whisked the young lady to one side and through a door. Just beyond were the broad back stairs of the comfortable old home; up them, arm linked through Ida's Henry ran swiftly.

"Oh, but—I don't think—"

"We'll sit down somewhere and talk sense and cool off for awhile," Henry puffed. "Any old place just so that we're completely out of sight and he'll have a good job hunting for us. Here—in here. This is the upstairs sitting room, and we can go out on the balcony."

He opened the door and thrust Miss Mears through. He closed it and laughed—in that same peculiarly boisterous way that had come to him with his victory over himself. He scratched a match and located the button beside the door.

"Oh!" gasped Ida.

"What's the matter?"

"This—this is—somebody's bedroom!" Miss Mears gasped.

"Huh?" said Henry with genuine astonishment. "Well, so it is. That's funny. This used to be—well, of course. It *is* the old sitting room. Gower's evidently taken it over for himself. However—"

"Never mind arguing. Let's get out of here!"

"No, let's stay here for a minute till I get my bearings," Henry chuckled. "Then we'll—"

"I don't want to stay here. I'm going."

"No, you're not!" Mr. Wells said, impatiently. "It's all right, Ida. He can't find us here and—"

He had caught Miss Mears, too, just as she was about to open the door. He was laughing again.

And then, suddenly, he ceased laughing, for over his very shoulder came the voice of Mr. Stannard, quivering, all but rattling in:

"He can't. hey? Well, he has!"

CHAPTER VII.

ON WITH THE DANCE.

IT will be assumed that Henry started back—and then leaped back and prepared to defend himself.

Henry did nothing of the kind. Briefly, he was startled, of course. Then he observed that Mr. Stannard had entered by the other door of the late sitting room, the one on the main corridor, which was standing open. This, as any one will understand, was the very perfection of a good joke. So Henry, opening his mouth, laughed directly in John's face.

There was no echoing mirth from the senior partner, however. Hands clenched at his sides, there was a strange calm upon Mr. Stannard.

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"Well, I guess this is my night for killing a man!" he observed. "I came near doing that for one, and now I'll *do* it for you!"

"Now, Johnny!" Henry laughed good naturedly. "Lay off all that tragedy stuff and listen to me for—"

"Listen to you! You watch me listen to you, you rotten cur!" Mr. Stannard cried. "You're the last man I'd have expected this from—and evidently you're just as rotten as the rest of 'em. But by the mighty, there'll be one less rotten one when I get through with you!"

And perhaps he would have leaped upon his smaller associate—who was really growing quite startled—but that Ida threw herself upon him bodily, clasping her tender arms tightly about his neck.

"Johnny! Please! John! We just came here to hide!"

"Let go of me and don't try to tell me—"

"Johnny, dearest! I swear it! I do, Johnny! Darling! Henry, why don't you tell him?"

"I'm trying to tell the blamed fool," Mr. Wells replied with a shrug. "We were going to hide and let you find us, and then give you a lesson by pointing out what a nut you were to feel that you had to hunt for Ida at all."

"Well, you picked a damned peculiar place for that kind of lesson!" Mr. Stannard submitted.

"But we thought it was the sitting room. John, Henry thought—" Ida wailed, and tears suddenly spurted from her pretty eyes.

Excess of emotion seemd to have turned John weak for a little. His own small eyes blazed at his partner, but they clouded when they looked down upon the girl and suddenly Mr. Stannard put his great protecting arms around her.

"That's what he told you, you poor little kid!" he breathed.

"That's the truth," snapped Henry.

"Say, one more word from *you,* and I'll be on my way to the gallows!" said the senior partner. "I thought I knew people pretty well, and I thought I knew you, Wells. But it appears that I didn't—and I'm done with you! D'ye hear? Done with you!" panted Mr. Stannard. "We'll continue the business until one of us can sell out to advantage. Otherwise, we're through!"

He turned his attention to Ida then and he trembled. Even from his profile, which was all that Henry could see just then, it was clear that Mr. Stannard, having hesitated perhaps ten seconds, had suddenly reached an iron, merciless decision.

"This is the end," he said grimly. "This settles it."

"Settles what, John?" Ida asked tremulously.

"This kind of party, for one thing. It's the second one I've attended and the first for you—and it 'll be the last for either of us for all time, believe me. Come!"

"Come where?"

"*Come!*" snapped the senior partner.

"But I—I don't want to go home yet. I—"

"You come with me, d'ye hear?" snarled Mr. Stannard, and in the most cowardly way laid his heavy grip upon her delicate wrist. "Stop pulling away like that and come! Well, by Heaven! I tell you, you will come, whether you want to or not!" he concluded, and bent a trifle and swept the tender young form into his arms. "What's the quickest way out of this hell hole?"

And now, after one savage glance about, he strode to the door and through—and Henry, gazing after, shook his head disgustedly and laughed again, quite ignoring the pleading hands Ida was stretching toward him. Because that, as he knew, was all piffle! Just one look at Ida's countenance and one felt that she was drawing more real delight from this brutal caveman performance than another lady might have drawn from a diamond necklace.

They were gone now. Good thing, too. That face, that disposition of Johnny Stannard's was enough to ruin any party. Perchance Henry could enjoy himself now, without hints or reproofs; perchance he might even do a little business.

He tripped gayly down the back stairs again and moved out upon the floor. They were all happy down here. Henry chuckled. Poor old Johnny—the only man in the world who could be unhappy in a company

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like this. He had the warmest affection for old Johnny, who would be himself again to-morrow morning; but just now it was a gayer party without him.

Henry chuckled again, this time directly into the face of Mr. Wallace Gower himself, who stopped short and failed to chuckle responsively. Mr. Gower, indeed, seemed markedly annoyed.

"Where's your partner?" he asked curtly.

"Eh? You mean John?"

"Of course—of course!" Mr. Gower said with that impatient, extremely supercilious air which he had brought back from beyond the seas for occasional use. Before this tone Henry bristled suddenly.

"Gone home!" he said.

"Oh! Has he really? Heaven be praised for that!" said the host, and a most unpleasant smile appeared on his lips. "I wanted to find him and ask him to do that very thing."

"Hey?" rasped Henry, eyes narrowing.

"Emphatically! Doubtless you appreciate him, Wells. I do not. He's your dear old chum and business associate—not mine, thank goodness!" clicked from Mr. Gower—and it really should have been clearer to Henry that a torrent of suppressed bad temper which belonged to the other half of the firm, was being poured out on his own head. "This is ostensibly a little gathering of rather decent people—not a cheap barroom. Do you know that Stannard actually struck Dan Patterson? Do you know that Dr. Still is working over him now, out in the kitchen?"

Henry merely shrugged.

"If John socked Danny, probably Danny deserved it," he said.

Plainly his words, the tone of his voice, sent a chill of pure horror through Wallace Gower. He shuddered delicately and recoiled.

"I'm afraid that my point was rather that, whatever the merits of the case, this was not quite the place to—er—sock him," he observed. "I haven't been in touch with him since I returned, of course, but I had no idea that Stannard had become such a lout!"

"See here!" said Henry, energetically. "John is no lout! He's—"

"Lout? He's the cheapest bounder I ever met. He's the very scum of the earth!" Mr. Gower retorted hotly. "He's—but there! There! Pardon me, I shouldn't have said that."

Henry considered him with mild and not particularly friendly wonder.

"Well, I don't know what your idea of a party may be, Wally," said he, "and probably it's a horrible break for me to offer any sort of criticism; but, offhand, I'd say that if you go around talking to a few more guests like that about their best friends, your party's likely to break up in a riot."

"Yes—yes," said the rich Mr. Gower, and glanced keenly at him; and then, ever so wearily, passed one slender hand across his artistic brow. "That was ghastly of me. But I'm tired—frightfully tired. I painted this afternoon until I lost the daylight. I shouldn't have done that, with all this ahead, but I was carried away by the thing I was doing. You'll forgive me?"

"Me?" Henry grinned tartly. "Nothing for me to forgive, is there?"

He passed on. Three steps, and he glanced back to Mr. Gower. Mr. Gower was watching him with a peculiar anxiety—although he turned quickly now and moved ahead.

Henry caught a small sigh. In plain truth he was growing slightly weary of this festivity. It was not actual weariness, of course; this new strength which had come with the big victory over himself would last for the rest of his life, as he understood. But it was still infernally hot in here and—well, that fact had dawned on some of the others, hadn't it?

The dancing couples had thinned out, and from the dusky reaches of the big garden a babble of voices was coming. Henry strolled to one of the tall windows and gazed upon the pretty scene.

And, gazing, he quickened. After all, he was here mainly for business. What with John and Ida and Wallace's remarks, Henry had forgotten business for a little; but right over there was the very incarnation of immediate and pressing business. Over there was Gloria Clay!

She was being led in the general direc-

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tion of the secluded old summer house by George Dingman. Henry scratched one ear meditatively. Of course, there were people from whom he would rather have detached the lovely Gloria. Old George, eternally smiling, eternally good natured and optimistic, was far too fine a fellow to offend; and if ecstatic downward glances meant anything George was certainly appreciating Gloria just now. However, business is business. Henry made his way swiftly across the dark lawn to the unsuspecting couple.

"Oh, Georgie!" he breathed.

"Oh, hello, Henry," said Mr. Dingman, and smiled, even if he did not go into raptures at the sight of Henry.

"I hate to do it, and still I must do it," Henry chuckled. "George, is there or is there not a certain beautiful young girl sitting in the southeast corner of the studio, tapping one foot and wondering what has become of the gentleman to whom this dance belongs?"

Mr. Dingman's eyes opened rather horrifiedly.

"Good Lord, is there?" he gasped. "Did I forget—"

"I imagine that you may have done something like that," said Henry. "Not that it's astonishing, all things considered, but you'd better skip in there. I'll look after Gloria until you get back."

Perturbed, conscience-stricken, Mr. Dingman departed hurriedly. Mrs. Clay regarded Henry rather coolly.

"That was a lie, wasn't it?"

"Strictly speaking, no. He may have drawn a wrong inference from something I said, of course," Henry laughed very comfortably and tucked one slender little hand under his arm. "Now let's go on to the summer house."

"I'm not sure that I wish—"

"Yes, you do, Gloria," Henry assured her. "We must talk, you and I."

"If you want to talk business—"

"Ah, but I don't, my child," said the junior partner. "My business day is over now."

He was learning, of course. With his wonderful new, clear vision, he saw the full value of the indirect intimate attack, as indicated by John Stannard. And with Gloria as the victim, it was not so likely to be an unpleasant process.

Henry glanced down at the girl and wondered suddenly why he himself had been so dense as not to appreciate Gloria? She was no less than astoundingly beautiful! Twenty-five or six now, she looked barely twenty. And, all else apart, she had eyes—she had eyes such as no man in his sane senses could look into and—well, they were in the summerhouse now, were they not? And the summerhouse, remarkably, was deserted. Out there, not ten feet distant, people moved about and talked and laughed; in here, they seemed to be miles away.

"Let's sit down, honey," Henry said with a long sigh.

"Before we do," said Mrs. Clay in her wonderful low voice, "why all the 'Gloria' and the 'honey' atmosphere?"

"Why not, when we're alone?" Mr. Wells inquired, impudently.

"Well, I rather thought this afternoon—"

"Gloria, please!" Henry broke in. "I had that fool appointment on my mind this afternoon—and if I made a clown of myself, I'm sorry. I'll get down on my knees and tell you that, if you like."

"It sounds a little more flattering," Mrs. Clay smiled, and did sit down.

Henry Wells, without the slightest hesitation, caught her hand and held it fast.

"Gloria," he began, "I—"

"Henry, this isn't going to degenerate into a petting party, is it?"

"Er—not in the ordinary sense, anyway," Henry laughed softly.

"Because I don't care very much for petting parties, in the ordinary sense or any other."

"Then, Gloria, believe me when I tell you that—"

"And another thing, Henry, all this fervor isn't becoming to an engaged man, I think," Mrs. Clay pursued in the same rather discouragingly even way. "That occurred to me this afternoon—later, you know. I mean that even if the sunshine and the hills and the open spaces did make me a little bit sentimental, I should have remembered—er—that."

An instant something stabbed straight

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through Henry Wells's heart. He caught at the barb, however, and dragged it out, hurling it from him. And if, in the very oddest way, he somehow sensed that this dragging process would have been much easier ten minutes ago, he hurled the barb far from him nevertheless and even laughed.

"There's nothing to remember now," he said. "I'm not engaged."

"What?"

"No!"

"Really, Henry?" asked Mrs. Clay, with considerable interest.

"Really, Gloria."

"Well—" breathed Gloria.

A certain aloof stiffness about her seemed to have melted away; without having moved she had come nearer to Henry Wells. And through this young man's brain there ran a sudden cold shudder—ran and was no more. Perhaps he had conquered this shudder; perhaps it really never had been. Henry Wells winked twice; and then, in the solitude, his arm went about Gloria Clay.

"It makes a difference," he murmured.

"It seems to make a difference," Mrs. Clay agreed thoughtfully. "Henry, I'm not at all sure that I want your arm there."

"Well, are you sure that you don't?" Henry inquired.

"No. That's the very dickens of it—I'm not," Gloria replied with much candor. "But, Henry, I think—oh, I don't know."

She looked up at him with her great, deep eyes, which actually glowed in the gloom. Another of the same peculiar shudders ran through Henry's mentality; he knew that he was about to kiss this extremely fascinating young person—he who not four hours ago had been the affianced husband of Miriam.

Well, the only changeless thing in life is the incessant process of change in all things! Yesterday and all its concerns are gone forever; to-morrow holds one knows not what; so the wise man lives in the more or less glittering present, plucking the prettiest flowers from beside his path; and unquestionably almost any normal young man must have envied Henry Wells this rather thrilling moment. So Henry drew breath and bent a little closer and—

"Oh!" gasped some one barely five feet distant.

Mrs. Clay started sharply. Even Henry sat erect rather suddenly. Vision in these deep shadows was none too good, yet one saw without difficulty the stunned, wounded expression on George Dingman's countenance.

"I—I—didn't know!" he stammered, backing out. "That is, I—well, excuse me and—"

"George!" Mrs. Clay called sharply.

But George was gone. The girl turned and regarded Henry with a gaze as inscrutable as any Henry had seen in all his days.

"He saw that," she said.

"What of it?"

"It's nothing to you, perhaps, but—"

"Well, is it anything to you, Gloria?"

"I—don't know, Henry. Sometimes—"

"Oh, let him come back and see some more!" this strangely altered individual cried recklessly; and he would have embraced Mrs. Clay again, but that she drew away with:

"Please, no! There will be nothing more for him to see! I—"

And here she stopped short, for they were no longer alone. George had returned rather energetically and— No, it wasn't George, either, Henry noted with another of those peculiar little shudders. It was a bigger and bulkier man; it was, in fact, none other than Tommy Greaves himself, the truculent, square-chinned young architect and one of Henry's pet detestations. More, he seemed to be in one of his most truculent moods, as evidenced by the forward hunch and the ominous swing of his arms.

Threateningly this person peered down upon Henry—and snorted disgust.

"Oh, it's you, Wells? They said it was Stannard."

"They erred."

"Where's Stannard?"

"I don't know."

"That's a lie," Mr. Greaves advised him. "Is he still here?"

"I—"

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"Because I'm going to find him and take him out on the flats, *now*, and teach him something. You know what he did, don't you?"

"I do not, and I'm not—"

"Well, he caught my little friend Danny Patterson out here and beat him almost to death," the architect explained, with an evil laugh. "I've been traveling around with Danny ever since we were kids, Wells; he's the best friend I've got in the world, and no man fifty pounds heavier can attack Danny without attacking *me!* I'm going to take your choice partner out on the flats—and if he isn't man enough to go, one or two of us will drag him to my car—and—"

"All right. But I'm not interested," Henry said mildly. "And I'm very sure that Mrs. Clay isn't, either. Just get out of the doorway and let us pass and then do what you like."

"I'll stay in this doorway as long as I feel like staying here!" said Mr. Greaves; and it was plain that in righteous fury he had quite lost himself.

"Oh, get out of the way!" Henry snapped impatiently; and he laid one palm upon the bosom of Mr. Greaves and pushed smartly.

Now, despite all the thousands that Wallace Gower had expended upon the rebuilding of his dwelling, he had allotted not one thin dime to the renovation of his two summerhouses—and this was an estate of the good old days. So it chanced that there was a loose board, a wide one and extremely loose. And upon the end of this board the indignant Mr. Greaves stepped, as he recoiled indignantly. And, all within a trifle less than two seconds, the far end of the board flew upward, striking the rafters of the roof with a crash that might have come from a piece of light artillery. And, all nature being a series of exact compensations, the end upon which Mr. Greaves stood went down, quite upsetting Mr. Greaves and hurling him outward in the most ridiculously sprawling fashion—eventually causing him to thud violently upon the turf, where he lay with arms and legs outstretched and dumfounded eyes gazing hot inquiry at the stars.

Nor did the episode terminate here, by any means. A number of people were close at hand, and most of these seemed to draw their own conclusions. Pringley, for example, who was a good old friend of Henry's, leaped forward. At once, from another direction, bounded a certain Howard Freese, who was Mr. Greaves's first cousin. Mr. Pringley cried:

"Here, you! You keep out of—"

"Keep out of it yourself!" Mr. Freese responded excitedly. "Stannard's knocked *him* out, too! Stannard's gone crazy!"

"It's not Stannard! It's Henry Wells. And if you touch—"

Shall it be told? Aye, seemingly it must be told. In the turmoil of the moment, this Howard Freese person aimed a blow directly at Mr. Pringley, catching him squarely upon the smooth-shaven cheek. And, so very thin is our veneer of civilization, all sense of decency and propriety were knocked from Mr. Pringley by this one blow. He howled, softly, strangely, as he clasped his countenance for a moment; then, both fists doubled, he leaped forward.

And, since both these gentlemen had plenty of friends, other interested gentlemen appeared in magic fashion and pushed forward, alert, eager, it almost seemed, for battle of the bloodiest description. A young girl screamed shrilly. Another girl screamed. Greaves was struggling to his feet, too, and snarling like an angry lion.

CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER THE BALL.

HOWEVER she may have seemed to shrink from him a few minutes earlier, Gloria Clay now seized Henry's arm with both her little hands and dragged him some ten yards from the storm center, which was the summerhouse.

Half a minute, perhaps, they stood rigid.

"It—it—they're *fighting!*" Gloria Clay choked.

"I—yes, I see that," Henry managed. "I can't understand—I mean, I never had any intention of—of—"

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"Henry, it—it's awful!" the girl gasped. "Let's get out of it quick!"

"You want to go home?" Henry asked, rather dazedly, tottered forward for an instant as a hurrying gentleman bumped his elbow, recovered himself.

"Yes, and at once! Henry, please!"

"Well, there's nothing about this that fascinates me, you know," Henry muttered. "I didn't want to come here in the first place."

They were moving now. Another half dozen paces and they were entirely out of that amazing surge of humanity which had so lately been promised the sensation of Burnstown's social season, and which, even if in another way, was still moving on to some such goal.

Even the cloak rooms were deserted when they reached them. Henry discovered his own hat without great difficulty, and was no more than back in the wide entry when Gloria appeared, flushed and wrapping a spangled cloak about her.

"My car's right at the corner, thank Heaven!" she said briefly, as she made for the door, with Henry at her heels. "I don't see why on earth you had to start that—that mess!"

"Start it? I didn't start it," Henry said blankly. "I had no idea when I tried to push that ape out of the way that he was going to stand on his head and kick the summerhouse to pieces."

"Well, suppose we don't stand here discussing it!" Mrs. Clay suggested with horrible sweetness. "The police will be on hand presently, I think, and I'm not anxious to be taken in with the other guests."

She led the way down the deserted walk to the street, while various really distressing sounds from the garden grew fainter. She led the way to her beautiful car at the corner, and there Henry, whose great new strength had diminished a little and in the oddest way, these last minutes, sighed:

"Er—I'm afraid you're not anxious to have me take you home either, Gloria. Who brought you?"

"George."

"Well, I'll find George, and—"

"Don't try, please! The last I saw of George, as we came away, he was loping straight for the battle like—like some great, ridiculous jack-rabbit."

"Yes," said Henry, with a strained smile. "Perhaps you'd rather just—ah—drive off alone?"

"I'd rather do nothing of the sort," the lovely Mrs. Clay said quite viciously. "The very least you can do is to take me home."

"Yes, Gloria," Henry murmured as he climbed in.

The engine started. Mrs. Clay released her brake. A moment, then, she looked up at Henry, and her lovely teeth showed in a somewhat repentant smile.

"I don't mean to be snappish, Henry. I'm sorry—really. But that was awful."

"Awful? It was incredible!" Henry said thickly.

More than this he did not say. Something very peculiar seemed to have happened to him—seemed to be happening right now.

It was quite as if the new, tremendous Henry were slowly evaporating. The thrills of power and self-confidence that had been so pronounced not ten minutes ago were fewer in number and of steadily diminishing force.

There was another inexplicable thing taking place, too. Henry Wells had never been up in an airplane, yet as they rolled along the still streets of Burnstown he knew exactly how it felt to descend from a great height in a series of long swoops. There'd be a breath-stopping glide—a period of sailing along on the level, when he regained himself a little—another swooping, breathless glide.

Nor was it all just physical sensation. After each of these glides Henry seemed a little lower mentally as well. Not that he was even approaching the condition of fathomless, heart-broken depression that he had known before the great fight and the complete conquest of himself, but—well, to be perfectly honest, *wasn't* he approaching that condition? Henry shuddered. He did not know, but he felt strongly inclined to think that he was. Miriam, in whatever manner, had insinuated her beautiful self into his brain again, hopelessly alluring as ever.

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Henry sighed heavily. Without a premonition of such a thing, he suddenly shaded a huge gasping yawn.

"Sorry to bore you, Henry, but we're here now, at any rate," Mrs. Clay said dryly, as she swung up the drive of the old Ferris place. "I'll run right into the garage, if you don't mind."

This she did, stepping out nimbly; and Henry Wells contrived at least to close the door for her and to snap the padlock. But as he walked beside Gloria to the house another great yawn caught him unawares and all but lifted his head from his shoulders.

"Well," he began at the doorstep, "I'll say good night, Gloria, and I'm—"

"Oh, come in for a minute."

"No, I think I'd better—"

"Please come, Henry, and help me look over the ground floor for burglars," urged Mrs. Clay. "I'm always nervous as a cat when I come in at this hour."

"Your cousin and the cook are upstairs, aren't they?"

"They're sound sleepers," said Gloria, and opened the door at last with her key.

Henry Wells followed, without emotion of any kind. This may not seem unusual to you, but it impressed Henry, in a dull way, as no less than astounding. Why, such a little while ago, he had been alive to the very finger tips! His brain—his body—his whole being—had been on tiptoe. Now he was merely numb once more, numb as he had been on the rock out at the end of Norton Street; he— Well, hang it, there was another yawn!

"It won't take long to look about," Gloria suggested rather hopelessly.

"I'll find your burglar and swallow him for you," Henry said angrily. "I don't know what's the matter with me, unless it is that I'm used to early hours."

"You don't mind going out the back way?"

"Not a bit. Why?"

"Because then you can shove in the big bolt on this door for me, Henry. I can never manage it."

She indicated it; Henry pushed the heavy bar into place. Mrs. Clay was looking over the fastenings of the windows. Funny! Henry never would have thought that she was the kind to be nervous over that sort of thing. He tried a few himself and found them altogether secure—in the drawing-room, in the dining room and pantry, now out in the kitchen.

"All fast!" he reported, with a wan attempt at gayety, and gulped back another yawn.

"All right, Henry, and thanks ever so much," Mrs. Clay said rather drearily. "Now run home to bed, boy."

"I think I'd better," Henry said grimly.

"And will you shake this door when you're outside, and make sure it's locked? I'll wait."

"Right," said Henry. "Good night, Gloria."

Not long ago he had, perhaps, been on the very verge of kissing this unreasonably pretty young woman. Well, he made no similar attempt just now—nor did Gloria seem to be in a receptive mood for anything of the sort. Her eyes were rather far-away and slightly tinged with nameless anxiety; there was something else in them, too, which looked almost like a suggestion of fear. The fingers which Henry pressed in the briefest and most perfunctory way were cool and rather limp.

"Good night, Henry," sighed Gloria. "Be sure to give it a good shake. The lock comes loose sometimes."

So, Henry, in the gloom of the Ferris place's back porch, shook violently at the door, and from the depths of the big old house came: "All right, I guess. Good night!" and that was that, and Henry's evening, whatever its merits, was over.

Now he might return to Mrs. Broughton's boarding house and turn in—or sit awhile, as seemed more likely, and think and think and— Henry yawned so mightily, so entirely without restraint, that little birds twittered sleepily in the trees overhead, and within the house Gloria's retreating steps halted, as if she had paused to listen.

Well, then, he wouldn't think and think. In fact, if he managed to keep his eyes open until he got to Mrs. Broughton's, he would be lucky. Henry grinned sourly and

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fumbled his way down the path to the back gate, since cutting through the rear street would save him a matter of two blocks. Fumbled and fumbled on, reflecting that this was probably the darkest night since the founding of Burnstown and that the authorities responsible for that rear street's illumination ought to be run out of office and—

Henry stopped short and suddenly bent; and as he bent he said aloud certain words which no really respectable and carefully reared young man should even have known. Not that he was entirely without excuse, to be sure; he had forgotten that there were sharp, heavy slats sticking out at each side as one entered the old grape arbor; now the matter was most vividly impressed upon his brain, probably to linger there forever—because one of these slats, darting out malignantly, had all but penetrated the joint of Henry's right knee.

Some seconds he stood upon one leg, commenting further and variously upon the mischance. He eased the injured member down and winced. Well, he'd have to sit down for a minute, until the infernal pain let up a little. He felt with the utmost caution for the seat which ran down the side of the arbor; he found it and settled down with a few final snarls, extending the unfortunate leg on the seat and rubbing the spot tenderly.

A minute or two, and the sting began to leave. Another five, and he'd go limping on his way again. Henry endeavored to hitch about, by way of resting his back against the arbor. It seemed fruitless, if he wished to leave the leg extended. He murmured quite luridly over the fourth attempt and then gave it up, stretching himself at full length on the seat, hands behind his head, staring darkly at the same stars which had invited the gaze of Mr. Greaves a little while ago.

Well, to-morrow early he'd phone old Finch and advise that the office be authorized to send a man up here with a saw and remove those damned projecting slats and—Henry yawned. Yes, sir! Before this tenant or some other tenant or some innocent bystander came this way in the dark and broke their legs and started suit for—

Henry yawned again. Lord, but it was cool and still and soothing here, after that gabbling rough house of Gower's! Mixing or no mixing, Henry loathed that sort of gathering and most similar gatherings. Here in the utter quiet, some little calm could get into a man's soul—yes, real—real calm into his—soul—

"Clink!" said something at a distance, with a glassy, musical little tinkle that just reached Henry's ear. And again: "Clink, clink!" And then, at about the same distance, some one said: "Giddap, you!"

Henry opened his eyes again languidly—he had closed them for a minute or two while the last of the pain departed—and looked about; looked, and looked again, and scowled. And then, knee quite forgotten and only a trifle stiff now, sat up suddenly and once more looked about.

That light up there in the trees! That was sunshine, fast enough. Young Mr. Wells stared hard at his watch; it had gone mad, of course, but it retained some character and firmness in its madness, because it stared straight back at Henry and continued to insist that the hour was exactly five minutes to five.

All right, then—it was fact.

He had put in the best part of the night on that confounded bench. Of course, had he realized his utter exhaustion, he never would have stretched out there, but he had stretched out and now he was stiff and lame and with more than the suggestion of a headache; which, to be sure, is no less than a man deserves who is fool enough to sleep in a grape arbor.

Henry stretched wearily and shook out his rather wrinkled raiment; he started quite sheepishly through the gate he had sought to reach five hours earlier. Well—he'd still get in two hours of Christian slumber between white sheets, if he hurried.

Henry, beset with a drab dreariness no sunshine could banish, rammed his hands deep into his pockets and hurried away, past houses from which as yet neither sound nor smoke were coming, past the milk wagon which had been responsible for the recent glassy clinking, on to the boarding house he called home these days.

It might behoove him, too, to enter this

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dwelling without making any undue racket. Mrs. Broughton, good soul as she might be, owned a Puritanical strain and still lived in the early eighties. Midnight, so Henry understood, was the very latest hour at which one might be greeted with a smile by Mrs. Broughton, did that lady chance to be awake and about.

Well, he had no yearning for argument with Mrs. Broughton this brilliant early morning. He sighed heavily and selected his key as he came down the block, clasping it firmly that it might not jingle against the others on the ring. He fitted it daintily as any housebreaker might have done and entered. A moment of listening, and Henry ascended, mouselike, to his chamber.

The usual pitcher of ice water, long since iceless, stood upon his table. He cackled oddly and made for it; he drank deeply, gratefully. Then, shoes off as the very first move, he made swift preparation for bed.

Some of us never attain regularity in the matter of going to sleep and waking up again. Some of us do, and of the latter Henry might have been crowned king. At seven thirty each morning, his eyes opened; at seven thirty-one his bare feet were upon the rug and Henry's day had begun.

So it was this morning, although he could not remember ever having greeted a day with less enthusiasm. Whatever his victory last night, the fight would have to be begun all over again, for he was down in the depths once more, with only gray, purposeless, Miriamless years stretched before him.

He sighed as he laved in the least exhilarating cold water he had ever encountered; he sighed as he dressed, immaculately as usual. Foggily, he suspected that his attempts at mixing, last night, had not been glowingly successful. Not that it mattered, one way or the other, save that it would entail much comment from John, and he felt no inclination toward comment from John or from any one else. Maybe it would be better just to go away and try to forget, try to start life over again? Maybe it would be better to head for California—

"Come in," Henry called as he started and turned at the knock.

"Are you dressed?" asked the peculiarly measured tone of Mrs. Broughton herself.

"Of course, I'm dressed," young Mr. Wells said briefly, and opened his door with more than a little wonder.

Tall, big-boned, forbidding at her best, nearer sixty than fifty, Mrs. Broughton entered. For Henry, at least, she had, as a rule, what passed for a smile. There was no suspicion of the smile this morning. Her cold eyes looked straight through Henry—and Henry was in no mood for being looked through this morning.

"What's the matter?" he asked shortly.

"You haven't even the grace to be ashamed!" said this strange lady.

"What in thunder have I to be ashamed of?" Henry snapped.

Mrs. Broughton shook her head.

"Hard and brazen as any of 'em, after all," she muttered. "Who could 'a' thought it?"

"I don't know who—"

"Well, I didn't come here to argue with you, Henry," the lady pursued, and drew herself up. "I knew your mamma and your papa since we were all children together, and I will say that no boy in Burnstown was looked after better or more careful than what you were. What I'm going to say hurts me more than it can hurt you, I guess, but I've got to say it."

Her lips tightened. Henry, leaning one hand somewhat wearily on the foot of his bed, regarded the lady with a stare about as unfriendly as her own tone.

"Go ahead and say it, Mrs. Broughton," he advised. "What is it?"

"It's this: you've got to leave my house."

"*What?*"

"And this morning, too, Henry Wells! Not this afternoon or to-morrow or next week—this morning!"

"But, why?"

"Because, whether I knew your mamma and your papa or not, you're *not* the kind of boarder I want, Henry, and you're not the kind my other guests 'll tolerate."

"Is all this because I came in after five this morning?"

"Put it that way if you choose," Mrs. Broughton sniffed.

"But that's plain rot! That's nonsense. How did you ever find out when I came in, anyway? I never made a sound."

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Mrs. Broughton seemed literally on the point of swallowing her lips.

"Mr. Doty told me," she said.

"Huh? Who's Mr. Doty?"

"He serves us with milk."

"Oh!" Henry laughed shortly. "Old Doty, the milkman—I remember. Well, why in the world Mr. Doty, the milkman, has to check up on my goings and comings I can't say, but—why, it 'd be plain darked nonsense for me to get out of here, Mrs. Broughton," Henry said, almost ingratiatingly, for, really, things were comfortable here and there was nothing attractive in the prospect of faring forth and finding another home.

"I know how you feel about late hours, and all that, but this was a party that I attended unexpectedly, you see. For that matter, if you want me to, I'll promise faithfully that it will not happen again. Don't know any reason why I should, but I will. So pardon it this time and don't throw me out on my ear just because I came in once after the curfew had rung. Eh?" grinned Henry Wells feebly.

Mrs. Broughton folded her arms.

"I'll have your breakfast brought up to you—*by the hired man*," she stated. "Can you be packed by ten?"

"Meaning that you simply insist on my getting out?"

"I do."

"Well, but—but—" Henry began.

And he looked about the room which, in simple truth, he had never liked very much, but which now he seemed to appreciate vastly. He looked at the rug, at the chairs, at the somewhat elderly dresser. And then, with a scowl, he walked to the latter and picked up an envelope. He started, too, did Henry Wells, and turned a shade paler as he faced about with:

"When did this come?"

"Last night."

"How?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I believe a boy brought it."

"Well, why in the world didn't they leave it where I could find it and—" Henry began as he slit the envelope.

There his voice died out and with it, curiously, the rest of his color. His hands shook a little, too, and a less keen observer than Mrs. Broughton would have known that, whatever its nature, Henry expected to find bad news within his envelope. Perhaps, as she had implied, the lady cherished a semi-maternal affection for Henry Wells; yet she folded her arms and only sighed comfortably, and waited.

Nor did she wait in vain, for suddenly Henry gasped. In the most melodramatic fashion, he clasped the sheet with both hands and read it again, holding it closer to his eyes. Ten seconds he stood, actually unbreathing; then he wheeled about and displayed a grin so wide, so glorified, that the lady stepped back in amazement—the first pace, that is; the second, which took her to the door, she made more in terror.

Because Henry Wells, the forlorn and forsaken, had come to life with one great bounce. His eyes sparkled; his color had returned in a red surge. One hand thrust the note into an inner pocket; the other waved quite crazily.

"Hooray!" shouted Henry Wells.

"You—you stop that racket!" the lady gasped. "People will think—"

"No, they won't! They don't! They can't!" Henry laughed almost uproariously; and, cocking his head and grinning even more tremendously, he added: "*Wow!*"

CHAPTER IX.

SUNSHINE.

THIS time Mrs. Broughton's normally narrow eyes dilated in genuine fright. Her work-worn hands clasped terrifiedly upon her spare bosom, too.

"Henry Wells, if you don't stop that screaming—" she essayed again.

The door opened a little wider. Through it came the lean countenance of one James Crane, who tenanted the third floor front.

"You need any assistance, Mrs. Broughton?" he asked quietly.

"Thank you, Mr. Crane, no. I've never seen the boarder yet I couldn't handle alone," the lady replied, breathlessly. "You—you might stay around this floor for a few minutes, though, if you will."

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Henry controlled himself.

"You needn't, Crane," he laughed. "Nothing violent's going to happen. And now—Mrs. B.!"

"What?"

"Well, I guess all I want to say is that if—if you were not a lady and an old neighbor of ours and all that, I'd just step over there and snap my fingers right under your nose!" Mr. Wells chuckled, happily. "As it is, I laugh at you—ha, ha, ha! Thus! I'm much obliged for everything you've ever done for me—I really am—but if things have come to such a pass that I can't come in when I please without being in disgrace, it's high time we parted company."

"So *I* think."

"Then we're in perfect agreement. It won't take me much more than half an hour to pack my trunk. I'll send for that during the day, of course, and I'll take my grip along with me. If you'll send a bill down to the office for what I owe you so far this month, I'll have a check mailed. Could anything be more satisfactory?"

"Nothing," said the tight-lipped lady. "I'll send up your breakfast."

"Don't," Henry said tartly. "I'll find my own breakfast."

Mrs. Broughton's chin went up frigidly as she turned and left that room. Henry waved an entirely absurd hand after her, attained the clothes press with three gay skips and tossed all four suits to the rumpled bed.

"Tooraloo! Tooraloo! Tooraloodleoodleloo!" sang Henry Wells.

You will wonder what had produced this remarkable change in him. Nothing could have been more simple than the thing itself—a mere two lines hurriedly scribbled on a bit of buff note paper. But the lines, gloriously graven into Henry's brain now, illuminating all its lately gloomy corners, were:

DEAREST:
I'm just an idiot. Please come and forgive me. MIRIAM.

Such they were; and while it may seem odd that Henry was not depressed by this frank confession of a faulty mental condition in the lady of his heart, the fact remained that he rejoiced—that he sang as he packed and opened drawers and hurled shoes across the floor—that he had, in truth, known no such utter exhilaration as this since the one great night when Miriam had agreed, with undisguised enthusiasm, to become Mrs. Henry Wells at some future date.

Once he paused and drew the note from his pocket and read it again and again, eventually kissing the mere words with an ecstasy that would have been silly in a schoolgirl.

Again he paused, this time to lift Miriam's framed picture from the dresser with reverent fingers, to wrap it then in a thick flannel shirt and after that in a vest and to lay it in the safest part of his grip. Otherwise, Henry packed quite cyclonically, finally landing on his trunk with a joyous leap and forcing the bulging lid to close—and then, since this place had been home for a couple of years, pausing for a last moment to look about it in farewell.

Really, it was queer that Mrs. B. should have gone off the handle like that just because he had come in after dawn. There must have been plenty of other boarders in her experience who had come in after dawn, although Henry could not recall any of them. He wondered if they, too, had been hurled forth as unceremoniously as all this; he wondered—no, he didn't wonder about anything, because he didn't give a hang, one way or the other, and he was in a hurry to get out.

He chuckled and picked up his grip and stepped briskly down the stairs. What did one do in the way of leave-taking in a situation of this character? Apparently one did nothing at all, for there was not a soul in sight and not a sound to be heard; it was rather as if boarders and proprietress and maids and all the rest had been eliminated completely from the scheme of things!

Henry looked about the lower hall and grinned; perhaps a curtain had moved back there; perhaps somebody had just caught his or her breath behind the music room hangings; perhaps there really was an interested maid peering at him over the upper banister. If so, and if they chose to take

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it like this, let 'em all go to the most undesirable part of Ballyhack, wherever that might be! Henry Wells walked out, whistling blithely and slammed the door after him.

And now for good old Norton Street! An ungodly hour, of course, but there are times when one does not wait on convention, and Miriam was a fairly early riser in any case.

Henry whistled his way to Norton Street, his grip swinging—whistled his way to the door of the little house—rang the bell and stood there, still whistling.

Here again was the good old parlor, too. He grinned at it almost foolishly. Just about twelve hours ago he had left this room forever, and a day. Now he was back again, and even the day had not passed.

And steps were running down the stairs. Henry caught his breath; his heart pounded; he swallowed—and *she was there!* Yes, radiant, ashamed, adoring, adorable, Miriam was there. It is debatable whether she hurried more rapidly toward Henry or Henry hurried more rapidly toward her; but at all events there was a sudden collision, and Henry's arms were fast about Miriam and, for that matter, Miram's arms were fast about Henry, and Miriam had cried:

"Oh, Henry, I'm such a darned fool!"

You will assume that Henry, a man and therefore strong, smoothed her lovely hair, smiled wonderfully down upon her and murmured something like: "There, there, sweetheart. We all make mistakes. But you, truest heart of all the world, must never doubt me again!" Oh, no.

"Aw, *kid!*" was all that Henry Wells said in that impressive moment, and he said this chokingly.

Miriam drew back and looked up at him.

"But it's only because I love you so that I am such a darned fool. You know that, don't you?"

"I know," said Henry, and held her the more tightly, drawing the red lips nearer to his own and—but let them be screened from public view at this sacred time. Aye, and it might be as well to leave them screened for a matter of ten or fifteen minutes—when some such period had elapsed, they spoke almost rationally again.

"Lovey," Henry was saying. "About Mrs. Clay. I don't care what John says, I promise I won't—"

"No." That's just exactly what I don't want you to promise!" Miriam said swiftly. "Because I think the most detestable woman in the whole world is the one who sticks her fingers into her husband's business because she's suspicious of him—I *won't* be like that! I want to help you and not be a curse to you!"

"But—"

"Only don't you ever dare hold her hand again!" Miriam said suddenly.

"On the level," said Henry with the utmost earnestness, "I don't believe I was holding it that time, honey."

"On the level," laughed this incomparable girl, "I don't believe you were, either—now. Only it looked as if you were—then," she added, musingly.

"You see, we're awfully anxious to sell her the house she's living in, because if we do—"

"Go ahead and sell it to her."

"Honestly, you don't mind if I see that much of her?"

"Honestly, darling," said Miriam and, his cheeks in her soft palms, looked squarely, gloriously up at him, "if I ever do anything like that again, get a whip and beat me! Your cheeks are hot."

"I—er—have a little headache."

"Oh, the poor head!" Miss Benton breathed, and stroked it soothingly. "You didn't lie awake last night, fussing about me?"

"No, I—" Henry began, and paused quite suddenly. "That is, I got home pretty late."

"How late?"

"Past five," Mr. Wells confessed.

"*This morning?*" Miriam cried.

"I went to a party after I left here—Wallace Gower's party, dear."

"You didn't saything to me about it last night."

"You didn't give me much chance to say anything last night," Henry sighed.

"I know; I'm ashamed," said Miss Benton, and laid the cool hand on his fore-

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head. "Henry Wells, did you—think you were desperate and—and drink anything?"

"I don't drink," said Henry. "No."

Miriam considered deeply for some seconds.

"Anyhow, it was my fault—your going at all."

"Nonsense."

"Yes, it was. I don't like him; I mean Wallace," Miss Benton reflected further. "No, no, no! I don't mean that I mind your having gone to the party. Only he seems such an affected simpleton, since he's been back. I've met him just once, and that was enough."

"Plenty!"

"Was it a nice party?"

"No, it was a rotten party!" Henry said heartily. "If I'd known how rotten it was going to be, I'd never have gone."

Miss Benton—she was sitting on Henry's knee at the time, by the way—played with the topmost button of his coat.

"Did you—take anybody?" she asked.

"No! Well—that is, in a way, I did, too. I took Ida Mears and—"

"The—you mean, the Mears girl who works in your office?" Miss Benton asked.

"Yes. But it was an accident, honey—really it was!" Henry said hurriedly. "You see, it happened that—"

Miriam laid a finger on his lips.

"No!" she said, with the utmost firmness. "Don't! That's the end of that sort of thing from me, Henry Wells! Hereafter you tell me just what you like about what you like. And I'll never ask a single question, because I'll always know, deep down in my heart, that there'll never be a single thing you couldn't tell me! Will there, Henry?"

"Never!" Henry said.

"And anyhow, you might have taken some one—some one worse than Ida."

"Worse?"

"I suppose I meant prettier."

"Well, did you mean—"

"No, I didn't mean one solitary thing!" Miriam responded, almost violently, and stood erect, and tugged suddenly at Henry's lapels. "You go to work!"

More, she led him resolutely to the entry and handed Henry his hat; then:

"Oh! Why the bag, dear? You're not going away?"

"Oh, no. I'm moving over to the inn," Henry laughed. "Mrs. Broughton threw me out, bag and baggage, for coming in after five."

"Really?" Miriam gasped indignantly. "Why, how dared she ever—"

"Oh, that's all right; I'm glad she did. I've been sort of looking for an excuse to go over to the inn for months. I'll stay there now till—gosh! I can't realize it!" Henry cried, and really grinned from ear to ear—"till we're married!"

And for some reason, with this sentiment voiced, Henry's bag banged down to the floor and again they were in each other's arms.

"And in our own home!" Miriam murmured.

"The two happiest people in the whole wide world!" Henry supplemented.

They parted, of course, although not for another five minutes.

Happy! Why, Henry was so utterly happy at this moment, as he hurried down Norton Street, bag swinging and hat on the back of his head, that he could have shouted for joy. As it was he laughed aloud, causing one or two people to stare inquiringly. Because the good old world was not only all right again—it was better than ever! And the sun, which only last evening he had fancied as permanently extinguished, was shining more brightly than it had ever shone before! Only one who has lost a genuine Miriam, has plunged into the seething fires of Hades as a consequence, and has been snatched out again unscathed, can appreciate quite how Henry Wells felt this morning. Even his headache was gone.

Kester, casual acquaintance and manager of the inn, opened his eyes at the sight of Henry and his bag. Kester, in person, escorted him upstairs, when he understood that Henry had come there to live, and found him a bright, pretty room; but young Mr. Wells made an extremely short job of all this, for he was hungry and certain cheery sounds from the inn dining room had made him distinctly hungrier.

He thanked Mr. Kester for his welcome

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and made straight for the head waiter, and the latter, casting an eye over his domain, sighed apologetically:

"Sorry, sir, but you'll have to wait three or four minutes for a table, I think. We're pretty full this morning."

Henry frowned impatiently and also looked about—looked and then stared, for a small hand had moved in inconspicuous salutation to himself; and whether it was impossible or otherwise, the hand belonged to Gloria herself! An instant Mr. Wells hesitated; then he crossed the room. He was hungry.

"May a starving man have breakfast with you, Gloria?" he inquired.

"If he's really starving, I suppose he may," Mrs. Clay smiled, charmingly.

"And may the same man ask what on earth *you're* doing here?" Henry pursued, as he took the other chair.

"This is my home!"

"What?"

"Well, it is until Saturday, anyway, Henry. I'm not going to stay in that great barn alone any longer. I spent all last night hearing spooks walk up and downstairs and burglars knock over furniture."

"But you were not alone last night?"

"But I was, whether you knew it or not. That's why I was so fussy about bolts and things, Henry. Nell went to New York Monday, and she'll be back at the end of the week; and yesterday afternoon our Tillie's son broke his leg or his neck, or something, and she had to rush over to Catesville. Oh, no! I didn't know I was such a fool about such things, but I came down here quite early this morning, thank you!"

"Well, just so that it has given me the privilege of breakfasting with you, I can't even feel sorry that you were scared, Gloria!" said Henry.

"Why, what a lovely, graceful remark, Henry!" laughed Mrs. Clay, and looked speculatively at him. "I didn't know you could say such things!"

"No? I'm plumb full of 'em!" Mr. Wells responded gayly. "Shall I say some more?"

"Tell the man what you want, and then say a lot more—yes!" said Gloria, and her wonderful eyes glowed—much, in fact, as they had glowed yesterday afternoon in the car on the ridge.

Henry Wells, owner of nearly all the high spirits in town this morning, threw back his head and laughed audibly, causing several more people to turn and stare.

"Oatmeal—bacon and eggs—buckwheat cakes—coffee—and put some speed behind 'em, Pierre!" he said merrily. "Now! What particularly beautiful thing would you like to have me say first? Something general or something personal?"

"Well, if it's particularly beautiful, let it be personal," Gloria said, with a delighted sigh. "And keep your eyes sparkling just like that, Henry; you're perfectly wonderful this morning! I never saw you so human and irresponsible and—well, I don't know, but stay just as you are. And *don't* talk sense, Henry, about anything! I mean, don't turn into a real estate agent again until we've finished breakfast at least!"

So Henry, without the slightest effort, remained just as he was; and if nearly all the other breakfasts of his life had been dull, routine affairs, this one was a decidedly gay little function.

A number of sound topics insisted upon entering his practical mind; with the most admirable repression he turned from them all. He talked, in fact, not one word of sense! Briefly, he found himself wishing to discuss the sale of the house to Gloria; he did not. He considered a humorous account of his night in her arbor and rejected that, too. There is nothing funny about a wrecked knee; and women are queer and fussy, of course, and the most natural thing would have been for Gloria to wonder if any one had seen him leave her back gate; and while Henry himself knew that every eye in the neighborhood was closed in slumber for a good hour after the incident, this might even disturb her. He had no wish to disturb Gloria; a certain comfortable, flattered feeling possessed him now, for she seemed fairly fascinated as he rattled on!

Still, gay as he may have been, let Henry not be misjudged; he was not flirting. He was merely superabundantly happy, and

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this happiness reacted upon his tongue and his whole demeanor. Firm in the knowledge that he was no longer under suspicion—for had he not Miriam's assurance on this point?—he could have shouted!

Other breakfasters reached the end of their meal and departed, some glancing at the chattering pair; the room came nearer and nearer to emptiness.

Henry and Gloria came to the end of their own meal—and did not depart. There was much to be said, and Gloria herself was no mean conversationalist. In a way, too, it was almost as if they were getting acquainted for the first time—even Henry sensed this vaguely. Why, somehow, until this morning he had never realized what a thoroughly charming good fellow Gloria was! And natural—absolutely, when one knew her better! When she reached over in the middle of an animated sentence and patted Henry's hand in emphasis, it was the most natural, unconscious gesture possible. When she—

"Is that clock striking *ten?*" Henry gasped abruptly.

"Um-um," said Gloria, without concern. "Now tell me—"

"Gloria, all I can tell you now is that if I don't hotfoot it down to that office, John 'll be dissolving the partnership!" Henry laughed, rising. "Honestly! I hate like sin to run, but I'll have to this time. Some—er—other time—"

Unsmilingly, Gloria considered her hand, which rested on the edge of the table.

"Will there be—some other time?" she sighed wistfully.

"You bet there will!" Henry said, with utmost heartiness.

He left, then, the dining room and the inn itself, even more highly stimulated than when he had entered! He hailed a taxi and bade the man put on all speed; then he stretched his legs and lighted a cigarette and laughed—and laughed.

He entered his place of business with a nod to all hands. All hands looked up and bade their junior partner good morning in a rather subdued way. His quick eye noted that the desk nearest the door—the smallest of all the new desks, which belonged to Willie, the office boy—was deserted. He strode on, whistling merrily, and opened the door of the private office and strode in.

John Stannard was there, of course.

John sat at his own desk, gazing darkly at the floor. The corners of his mouth were down. His shoulders were hunched forward. One elbow was on the desk, and upon the hand rested John Stannard's chin. One sensed that while, as a child, John might have smiled grudgingly on rare occasions, the last even of these smiles had died out many, many years ago, and that there would never be another. Done in bronze, and labeled "Gloom," John could have been shipped all over the country, from exhibition to exhibition, taking first prize in every one!

"Ah!" he observed.

"Morning, John! Why all the cheers and the gay bunting?" Henry asked cheerily. "What was in the well-known first mail? Anything good?"

Mr. Stannard's head came up with an effort. His large hands clasped, now, and his somber gaze rested steadily on his partner.

"Well—sobered up enough to get down during the day after all, did you?" he asked.

CHAPTER X.

SHOWERS.

NOW, on the average morning a salutation such as this would have caused Henry to stop in his tracks and stare at his old friend and associate—would have caused him to bristle and to demand the reason for such a question. But not this morning.

Henry merely stepped along on his pink cloud, to his own desk, and sat down with a rich, happy chuckle. He glanced at the unimportant half dozen letters marked for his personal attention as he murmured:

"Grouch, hey? How parties do sweeten you, don't they?"

"*Are* you?" John rapped out.

"Am I—am I—" Henry muttered as he read a letter; and then looked up with a grin and: "Am I what? What are you talking about?"

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The statue of Gloom broke its pose, and rose, and lumbered over to his side. In this short trip it became, approximately, five hundred per cent gloomier!

"Don't try to pull that innocent stuff on me!" it said. "It doesn't get over? Are you sober or are you not?"

"Why, so far as I'm aware, I am—much obliged," said Henry, mildly.

Mr. Stannard threw up his hands in a great, desperate gesture.

"Well, it's a damned shame you couldn't have stayed sober last night, then!" he cried.

"Say, look here!" said Henry Wells, unsmiling at last. "I don't mind your slurs as a rule, but—"

"Oh, I heard all about it, you know. If it comes to that, I had a strong suspicion that you were pickled before I left the party!" his partner rumbled, savagely. "You were beginning, if you weren't actually pickled!"

"But—"

"Get rid of that baby stare! I tell you, I've heard all about it! That telephone was ringing when I got here at quarter of nine, and it's been ringing ever since—interested friends telling me about my—my dear partner!"

"All right, then!" Henry snapped. "What have your friends been telling you?"

John Stannard sat down again with a dull thud.

"Henry, you did damage enough before I left. Why did you have to wreck that affair?"

"I didn't—"

"Don't lie to me! I've heard a dozen versions, and they all jibe. You got into some sort of argument with Wallace Gower. Then you went out into the garden and deliberately started a free-for-all fight—a *fight* at an affair like that!"

"I did nothing of the kind! That fool business began when Greaves was looking for you, I tell you. *You* picked an affair like that to beat up little Danny Patterson—and then you ran away, quick!" Henry said quite viciously.

"Bunk!"

"What is?"

"All of it!" responded Mr. Stannard, and in his mood this morning he did seem a trifle unreasonable.

Henry Wells merely shrugged his shoulders and picked up the second letter.

"All right. If it's bunk, it's bunk," he said disgustedly.

A groan came from Mr. Stannard.

"Whatever possessed you to get drunk?" he demanded.

"What? I didn't! I was never drunk in my life!"

"You know you've all but ruined the firm, if you haven't actually done it, don't you?"

"I don't know anything of the sort!" Henry Wells barked. "And if *you're* not suffering from a hang over at this minute, I'll eat this desk! Now drop it—because it's getting tiresome. Here's a letter from that Mrs. Dunham; she wants the keys to 48 Powell Avenue. We'll send Willy up with 'em, on the double. That's three times she's nibbled at that house and—"

"Willy!" Mr. Stannard cried, with a great, hollow hoot that was meant for a laugh.

"Well?" Henry asked wonderingly.

"We've been without Willy for half an hour or more. His mother telephoned down and told him to quit the job at once. She said, after what she'd heard of Mr. Wells, she wouldn't risk having her boy work for this firm! A good kid he was, too—the best kind of boy! I said to her: 'Mrs. Doty, I am sure—'"

"Was our Willie any relation to the Doty that has the milk route?" Henry asked suddenly.

"What? Yes, he's the boy's grandfather, I believe. I said to his mother—"

"Say, what in blazes do I care what you said to his mother?" the junior partner demanded, in rising irritation. "Go call on his confounded mother and talk to her all day if you like, but don't bother me about it. Do you want to hire another boy yourself, or shall I try to find one?"

John Stannard shook his head grimly.

"Henry, d'ye know," said he, "a good many times since we were kids, I've wondered if there wasn't more under that bread-and-butter exterior of yours than

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ever got to the surface for public view? I've wondered if all this virtue, all this teetotaler stuff wasn't just a stall and a blind and a cloak? But I never suspected that you were as hard and conscienceless and—"

"Say, are you trying to accuse me of something definite?" Henry demanded, and there was an edge to the words.

"Accuse you?" Mr. Stannard gasped. "After you've gone to work and antagonized everybody in town we couldn't afford to antagonize? After you've started a free fight at the swellest party any one ever tried to give in Burnstown and made yourself — and that means the firm — the scandal of the city! After you've deliberately, maliciously ruined our chance for that Ridge job and—"

Mr. Stannard's voice broke suddenly. His teeth shut hard; his face contorted astoundingly. His head bent and his shoulders shook. Such a manifestation in a strong man is frightful! It sent a chill through Henry.

"You're not going to cry about it?" he gasped.

"I—I—" John said thickly; and then he sat up and, unashamed, wiped away the tears and blew his nose violently. "No, I'm damned if I am; but if ever a man had his heart set on getting somewhere, I had mine set on that Ridge job!" A last convulsion, a last gulp and he was himself again. "Well, you and I are going to have a heart to heart talk now, and it 'll probably be the last one!"

"Well, whether it is or not, we're going to have it!" Henry responded, with equal force. "And when it's done, some things in your fool head—"

He subsided. Mr. Stannard's telephone was ringing.

Mr. Stannard, in the act of turning purple with righteous fury, calmed a trifle and steadied his voice as he answered; and then, after a start, turned paler and paler still, until he was almost white.

"Yes? Yes—yes—yes—" was the substance of his conversation until it concluded with his short: "All right. I'll come down at once."

He hung up the receiver and rose, looking steadily at Henry Wells. If he had been Gloom before, he was Tragedy now.

"First National Bank!" said he.

"Aha?"

"We're invited to take up our three demand notes! That's *your* work!"

"Oh, tell 'em to go to—" Henry began impatiently.

"Wells!" the senior partner thundered, and his great fist banged down on the desk. "This firm has never evaded an obligation by so much as one minute! It has never asked for extensions—or even for days of grace!"

"Shows it's a good firm, but—"

"And it isn't going to begin now, because one partner went on a crazy spree! Taking up those notes is going to clean us out, absolutely, and where we'll get more money in a hurry I can't say! But they'll be taken up!"

He reached for his hat. He slapped the hat upon his head and squared his shoulders. Like a great, brave soul marching to the gallows, Mr. Stannard marched from the private office with not one further word of comment!

And with his going, it may be said, Henry's late exuberance had almost entirely evaporated! Two or three minutes he sat quite still, scowling at the closed door; then he hitched about restlessly and scowled at the desk for another period.

Because this really was quite a kettle of fish! Not that it was half as bad—or one-fiftieth as bad, for that matter—as John seemed to fancy; but on the other hand it was darned unpleasant—almost as unpleasant as it was wholly idiotic. That was one of the bad features of a place like Burnstown, anyhow. Not so large a city that nobody knew anybody—not so small a town that everybody knew everybody—with friendships and acquaintanceships and little cliques spattered here and there, all over its area, it was of just the ideal size for the swift cultivation of unpleasant rumors.

Let one walk down Main Street in Burnstown four times with the same girl, and a certain number of people were bound to watch the papers every evening for the announcement of an engagement; let one

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laugh hilariously in Burnstown, and almost inevitably he was a confirmed drunkard, off on a new outburst!

But then again—for Henry's conscience was a rather sensitive quantity—maybe he actually *had* done some damage?

Maybe he was ordinarily such a silent, mealy-mouthed creature that even one hour of gayety in a gay place *had* given somebody the impression that he was under the influence of liquor? Queer, that battle with himself last night and the altitudes to which the complete conquest had raised him! Not that he would ever need to do battle again, with sweet Miriam back in her sane senses, but—well, this wasn't considering the unfortunate situation, was it?

One point seemed clear enough. If people really had been going to the trouble of telephoning to Stannard about it, some of the blame for the disturbance at the Gower party had been placed, however unjustly, on Henry's shoulders. That was beastly enough, of course, but so long as it really seemed to be there, he'd have to make some sort of amends to Gower, attempt some sort of explanation.

And that, by thunder, was all he would do, in the way of explanation or the way of anything else! Let John be as much of a jackass as he chose, it was the intention of Henry Wells to start in now and do some real business, because in another month or so he'd be a married man and— Well, Gower would have to be placated—so much was sure—and the sooner the job had been done, the better.

Henry arose after another glance at the mail and sighed and placed his hat at a more sedate angle. Henry, with another sigh, lighted a cigarette and started for the door—and stopped at the entrance of one Nathaniel Royce, who occupied the desk next to that of the departed Willie, and who was, bar none, the best and most tactful little collector of rents and odd accounts in seven States. They valued Royce, did Stannard & Wells; twice this last year they had raised his salary without suggestion on the part of Mr. Royce.

And here he was, a cheery presence, to be sure, smiling rather oddly at Henry as he said:

"Got a minute for me, boss?"

"Dozen of 'em, if you like," Henry said readily. "What's on your mind, Nat?"

Mr. Royce glanced at him and then smiled, just over Henry's head.

"Not so very much," said he. "I just—well, the fact of the matter is, Mr. Wells, I'm leaving."

"Leaving your job?"

"Leaving it flat!" Royce grinned amiably.

"Why?"

"The usual thing, I suppose. It's—a question of more money. A man has to do the best he can for himself."

Henry sighed for the third time in two minutes. Mr. Stannard, he was quite sure, would not approve, but it had to be done.

"You're not leaving," he said readily. "I'll raise you five per, Royce—and that's the last raise for awhile, by the way."

"Well, so far as that goes, I guess the last one was the last in this office," the valued one responded, with another grin. "I've had a—a considerably better offer than that."

"Who made it?"

"Er—Donaldson."

"When?"

"Just this morning."

Henry considered swiftly.

"Well, if it isn't asking an impertinent question, how much did he offer?"

"Just twenty more a week than I'm getting here."

Henry ceased considering and held out his hand.

"Good-by, Royce," he said simply. "Sorry to see you go."

"Oh, you'll get somebody a darned sight better for my place," the other assured him.

And he left, not only the private office, but the firm itself—and one grand and glorious old job they were going to have getting any one to fill his place. Henry Wells groaned faintly and sat down again, just for a moment. Why, they'd tried out eight different people before finding Royce—eight boneheaded, half-witted incompetents, every one of them worth less than nothing.

Then little Royce had come to gladden

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their lives and smooth their business pathway—and now he was gone. Gone, drat his thankless hide!

And—Henry looked up, for the door had clicked.

It was only Ida, Henry noted. Or perhaps the "only" was an error. There was something odd about even Ida this morning, something indefinably new and possibly authoritative, but that this were nonsense; something rather emotional, too.

She went directly to Henry's side. "Did he quit?" she asked.

"Royce? He did."

"Why?"

"Well, I don't know that it's any particular concern of yours, Ida, but he was offered more money and—"

"That's not so. Or if it is, it isn't the real reason. He quit because he was ashamed to work for a firm that had *you* for a member!" Miss Mears said amazingly.

"*What?*"

"John will be furious! He'll be even more furious than he is now—and it's horrible when he's furious. Oh, *you*—"

"Wait a second, Ida!" Henry snapped, and arose. "You're a nice kid, and I've known you all your life, and apparently John is dead stuck on you, and all the rest of it. But if you've got it into your head that you're running this firm, it's time the next desk to Royce's was vacant, too! Get it?"

"You mean—you—you—" Ida gasped, and her lips trembled.

"I mean that you're fired, too. You're fired on the spot, to stay fired!"

"I—I'm not!" Miss Mears insisted stormily. "I'll just show *you*—"

"No, you won't show me anything!" the junior partner said sternly. "*I'll* show *you* that— Well, what are you bawling about?" he demanded, and his tone grew suddenly quite blank. "Here! Go over on John's desk if you want to cry. That's a fresh blotter on mine, and I don't want it all soaked."

"Ooooo!" said Ida, in substance, and bent lower.

Young Mr. Wells threw up his hands and jammed his hat down tighter.

"All right, then! Bawl your blooming head off, just as you are!" he exploded in a burst of wildest discourtesy. "Fresh blotter only costs ten cents anyway! Only see that you're out of this shop before I get back, young lady!"

He fled, breathing heavily.

To the street did Henry flee and up the street, still breathing heavily; and in simple justice it must be conceded that there was some reason for all this heavy breathing. That portion of the world nearest Henry had gone crazy. Henry had not. Small wonder, then, that the surrounding madness irked him.

And there was nothing very soothing about the prospect just ahead, either. He had never been quite the fanatical admirer of Wallace Gower; in fact, more than once he had laughed openly at the gentleman and at his pretensions and his affectations. Still, since the responsibility for last night's disaster seemed to have fastened upon Henry, it would now be his portion to eat some humble pie at Mr. Gower's board.

He reached the door. He mustered what most people, at least, would have recognized as an attempted smile, and pressed the button. He found himself confronting that small, lean colored youth Gower had brought back with him, presumably from foreign parts, who shook his head dubiously.

"Don' think Mr. Gower can see anybody this mawnin'," he began. "You see—"

"Who is that? Who is that?" Wallace's voice asked sharply from somewhere beyond. "Wells? Show him in! At once, I say!"

Thus Henry was shown in to the studio, which had not been altogether cleaned up since last night. The door closed upon him and he looked drearily at Gower, who seemed to be in a really distressing state. His hair was rumpled, at any rate; his wide-collared shirt was open at the neck; in long black kimono his long legs strode back and forth and his long cigarette holder waved.

All these things, Henry assumed, denoted great mental anguish. He considered his own cigarette and dropped it in the most informal way and stepped on it; he had

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always preferred cigars, save that he smoked too many of them.

"Well? Well?" Mr. Gower demanded, stopping before him, running one hand through his hair and waving the cigarette holder threateningly.

"Well, I—I came in to apologize for what I—er—*didn't* do last night, but what seems to have been pinned on me and—"

Mr. Gower threw up both hands with such violence that the cigarette left the holder and flew across the room. He also laughed insanely.

"For what you *didn't* do? High heaven above us! Was there anything you neglected to do last night, Wells?" he cried.

"Yes—a whole lot of things. If we're going to stick to facts, I didn't do anything. But so long as there seems to be an impression that I did, I came in to apologize and—"

"All right. Your apology's accepted, of course," Wallace said bitterly, and resumed his walk. "What the point of an apology is now, I fail to see. I fail to see how you dare show your face here, Wells! Or on the street!"

"Well, whether you fail to see it or not, I still—"

Mr. Gower stopped again, pulled violently on the empty holder, whined in fury, and ground it under his heel. He was indeed in a state.

"You know what you've done, Wells?"

"I—"

"You've ruined me!"

"I—"

"You've ruined my whole future—my whole career!"

"I—"

"*You've ruined Burnstown!*" cried Mr. Gower.

"Oh, drop that damned poppycock!" Henry cried coarsely. "I—"

"But you have! I mean the artistic side of Burnstown. Nothing else matters. Does it? Does it? You know what I'd planned?"

"I have no idea, and I'm not interested," Henry said flatly.

"I'd planned to make Burnstown the true æsthetic center of the State, Wells! Perhaps of the whole country! Who knows? I might have done that—I might well enough have done that. Why, Wells, for months and months I've been planning that little party! I'd chosen my people—discarding some, adding some, hesitating about others. I wanted to get all sorts together last night—I mean possible people, you understand. I wanted to watch them, to gauge them. And from them all, whether they were rich or poor or in between, I wanted to begin picking a circle!" Mr. Gower declaimed with appropriate gestures. "And then I meant to build—to build and to teach!"

"Aha?" said Henry.

"And that wasn't the only purpose," the artist pursued, and whether or not he so intended, a more practical, ordinary note came into his voice. "I had the best people in the county here last night, Wells! I had meant to show them some of my work—just to a few chosen ones, you understand.

"I had meant, perhaps, to sell one or two pictures, if they insisted on that, and to learn their tastes and their likes. And then *you*, spitefully, after threatening me with something so incredible that I could not give it a second thought, *you* actually did wreak your cheap little vengeance!" cried Mr. Gower, and his voice, rising to a shriek, broke sharply, and tears spurted from his eyes. "And the best people were gone, before the police got here," he sobbed suddenly, throwing himself upon a divan. "Before—the police—"

His whole slender form heaved in wave upon wave of measureless grief. He could say no more. It was just as well, too, because Henry did not wish to listen to any more. Three seconds he devoted to staring at Mr. Gower, while his fists clenched and his mouth worked peculiarly. Then he mastered himself and started for the door with a thick:

"What 'd your man do with my hat, Gower?"

The artist answered only with a moan. Henry Wells marched on, beads of perspiration on his forehead, snatched his hat angrily from a dark hand, and kept on to the street.

His jaw was set; he did not turn back

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for further apologies; some little inner voice advised him that, not only would these not be made, but even further distress might come to the remarkable Mr. Gower. Steadily he marched on.

Then things began to clear. He was nearing the down town section once more, nearing the office. Well, he had no great craving to return to the office and the murky maunderings of John and the hysterical squeaks of his moron inamorata. Nay, what Henry craved was some more laughter of the sort that had graced his earlier morning—that and some calm, lucid information on what really had happened at that infernal party last night.

He frowned and looked about, and, so looking, his eye came upon the gold lettering on two windows of the second story across the way, which advised the world that "George Dingman, Insurance," held forth at just that spot.

It was a hunch! Old George had been at the great festivity, and old George was sane; and, still more, he was so incurably cheerful that he'd been dubbed "Smiling George" ever since boyhood.

Henry crossed the street nimbly, and, without waiting for the elevator, skipped up the elderly wooden stairs and opened the door of George's office.

He seemed to be alone just now, which was fortunate. He was at his desk; and now he was looking up, and Henry jumped an inch or so and stared utter incredulity, for not only had George lost his chronic smile, but for sheer hopeless woe his expression made the mere gloom of John Stannard seem like the impish gayety of a romping little child.

There was more in Mr. Dingman than sheer woe, however. At the sight of Henry Wells he leaped to his feet, eyes dilated with nameless, immeasurable fury, every fiber of him trembling visibly. So he stood for many seconds, obviously unable to move or to speak, while Henry Wells merely gaped with mouth literally open.

And then:

"*No!*" came from Mr. Dingman, in one great, terrible cry that suggested only the final shriek of a soul eternally damned. "Not you, because—but if—no! no! Killing wouldn't help! Killing—and not you—"

More than this the inexplicable Mr. Dingman, apparently, could not say. Or perhaps it was a literal convulsion of some sort that was seizing him now? His tight-clenched hands went suddenly to his face, covering the features, shaking in a perfect ecstasy of grief. And now, as if his knees had given away, Mr. Dingman dropped suddenly into his chair and hurled himself upon the desk.

The casual observer could not have failed to think that he was endeavoring to drive hands, face and possibly even the rest of his skull straight down through the heavy oak. And his shoulders rocked and he choked:

"*No! No! But—*" and there the last shred of self-control departed; and Smiling George, in great, strangling, gasping sobs, said no more and no less than a literal: "Boo! Hoo! Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

CARELESS LOVE

WHEN tears fell and tempers clashed
And Love was put to rout,
He hurried, while the lightnings flashed
To put the fires out.

But as he snuffed each tender flare
And hastened to depart,
He left one careless ember there
Smoldering in a heart.

Ere summer came he chanced that way
And marveled at the sight—
The fair one in that heart held sway,
Its windows all alight!

Susanna Drake Bishop.

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Better Mouse Traps

By WALTER A. SINCLAIR

THE girl across the car aisle was weeping. Adding to her distress, she had no handkerchief. Her frantic, tear-blinded search of vanity case yielded everything but that.

A trim, attractive girl, she was attired in lightest summer marching order—a pansy linen frock having no pockets for a handkerchief. She dabbed ineffectually with her absurdly small powder puff to stanch the tears.

Dexter could refrain no longer. Sight of a girl in tears always was more than he could bear. And he could not order her thrown out, even though she was breaking his heart, because the sliding side doors of the subway car were tightly closed, and there were no end doors.

They were on that sort of car—the kind with a radiophone in place of a guard for announcing stations. The train had been stalled in the tunnel under the East River for twenty minutes when Dexter noticed her.

There were nine other passengers, all hardy Brooklynites, who had relapsed into a comatose condition until the delay was over. If the girl raised an outcry, he could not escape from the car. Still—

"Try this," he invited, extending across the aisle an immaculate, freshly laundered handkerchief from his coat breast pocket. As she gazed uncomprehendingly, he added: "You can rent space on this."

When she grasped the linen, dabbing her eyes, and murmuring thanks and something about having lost hers, Dexter subsided into the crossword puzzle which had been helping him endure the delay.

Presently a little chuckle recalled his at-

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tention, which had not been very far away. She was smiling at him as she readjusted a few artistic touches with the aid of the vanity case.

"Rainbow," he commented on the after-shower tint.

"I had to laugh at the idea of renting space on your clean hanky," she explained, raising her voice. Although the train was stalled, the motorman was making the tunnel echo with deafening whistle toots.

Dexter crossed the aisle and seated himself beside her.

"No use straining our voices yelling across the airshaft, now that we've decided to settle here permanently," he stated.

"This delay drove me to tears," she explained with that human desire to tell it to somebody. "You probably thought it was just for some trivial reason like missing a matinée. As a matter of fact, this blockade has done me out of a chance to sell a factory I own."

She said the last rather proudly, and Dexter regarded her with respect due a factory owner. Despite its simplicity, her attire did have a modish appearance. But she seemed appallingly young for the responsible rôle—not more than twenty-one. His face said so.

She promptly explained that it was a rather small factory, left her by the death of her father a year earlier. During the past few months, since reaching her majority, she had managed her factory personally. In order to retrench, she had dispensed with the services of the lawyer who had handled her affairs.

That day being hot and business dull, she had attended a "hen luncheon" at the home of a friend living in Bay Ridge. And, of course, that was the day a prospective purchaser chose to call at her factory. Hers was one of two he was considering for a choice. Her absence had inspired the prospective buyer to act in a dictatorial fashion. He had announced that if she did not appear within two hours he would buy the other plant. Her stolid foreman had waited an hour before trying to locate her by telephone.

More time had been lost ere she started on her Manhattanward rush, which ended ignominiously under the river. But for that blockade, she could have made the appointment by a ten-minute margin. Hence, tears.

"I am Betty Randell," she added. "I suppose introductions are in order, after telling my life story to a car acquaintance."

"Don't dispose of me so casually," he requested. "I may be of some assistance in your case. My name is Morton B. Dexter, business beautifier. Gloomy outlooks made attractive. What, may I ask, do you manufacture?"

"Mouse traps," she replied in the tiniest, most abashed voice.

They stared solemnly and then burst out laughing.

"Here I've been doing the grand," she went on, "talking as though I might be Ford or Gary, about 'my factory.' A dinky little loft in an old building in Barclay Street that must have been there during Washington's administration, and for which I pay scandalously high rent. That's my *factory*. And I manufacture—*mouse* traps!"

"What brand?" he asked breathlessly. "Its trade name?"

"Mouse traps aren't motor cars," she answered scornfully. "They're all alike, just common or garden variety of ten cent traps."

"Just what I suspected," he exclaimed triumphantly. "I wanted it verified by—a manufacturer. But why the scorn? Think of all the nationally advertised ten cent articles, sold by their trade names, that have made millions. But mouse traps? Those necessary contrivances are treated by makers as something to be ashamed of, pushed out nameless, unadvertised to the five-and-tens. Nobody thinks of gradations of quality in such articles. Nobody specifies the Jones Mouse Trap or the Betty Mou—"

Full stop in the word's length he made, while they stared into one another's eyes where inspiration was lighting.

"Emerson said—" they began in duet. There he stopped her with an imperative, traffic policeman raising of the hand.

"Let me speak the prologue," he insisted. "Emerson said, 'If a man—make

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a better mouse trap than his neighbor, though he build his home in the wilderness, the world will make a beaten path to his door.'

"Eureka! We have found it—the missing, unkeyed letter. We'll make better mouse traps. For ages people have been buying just any mouse trap. We'll make *the* mouse trap—with a name, your name. Notice how we both jumped when I said Betty? That's perfect—Betty Mouse Traps. No, wait. H-m! Betty Randell? Two eurekas! We'll make Betty-R Mouse Traps. The world will beat a track to your door to hand you big money."

"Fine!" thrilled Betty, without discouraging the "we" remarks. "But just how are we going to get the world to do that small thing?"

"Sell the world on you," he enthused, warming to his subject. "How? How was it sold on California climate? On Florida real estate? On Atlantic City's boardwalk? On flivvers? On the movies? By a good article plus publicity."

"Publicity?" she repeated, a trifle uncertainly.

"Somebody said," he went on, "the manufacturer of a good article who doesn't advertise is like a lover who throws his sweety a kiss in the dark. It's good, but only he knows it. Why, you've got a publicity program made to order, your business being what it is. Every one who quotes anything knows that one about mouse traps and wilderness."

"Yes," she puzzled, "but New York isn't a wilderness."

"Exactly," he cried, triumphantly. "Why cling to the highest priced rental city on earth to make traps when your business could be set up in a wilderness? Can you get rid of the lease?"

"Yes," she replied. "In fact, I've had a good offer made for my lease by a radio accessories firm that wants to get into that neighborhood with the others. But if we had a plant in a wilderness, wouldn't the freight wipe out our margin on a ten cent product?"

"Who said anything about ten centers?" he demanded. "We—pardon—you are going to make *better* mouse traps, to retail at twenty-five or fifty cents, maybe a dollar for specially designed, individual styles. We'll educate people to buy 'em in sets of three or a half dozen. Beautiful white enameled mouse traps for beautiful white enameled kitchen equipment. We'll make Betty-R Mouse Traps a mark of distinction. And I know a perfectly good wilderness for the workshop."

"It's perfectly wonderful!" she admired, wide-eyed. "Perfectly wonderful what a business expert like you can do with originality to make a dull, down-at-the-heels business into something fascinating and prosperous. You seem too young to have had such wide experience."

"Satisfied to let me try?" he asked.

She nodded eagerly.

"Then I'll come clean. This is my first business face lifting. I decided on my new profession when you told of your plight. Unconsciously, though, I have been preparing for it ever since leaving college, two years ago.

"I have been groping mentally for some new line to fit my talents. I learned some business in an office. Then something of life as a newspaper reporter. Then I developed the idea groove of my brain, working three months for two fellows who ran a publicity bureau until business flopped. Now I'm ready to launch my business and make a rep on you—unless you decide to cancel."

"You're not going to back out after getting me so excited and enthused?" she cried. "I never was so eager to—why! Where are we?"

Warm sunshine suddenly had flooded the car.

"Long Island City, I'd say," he grinned. Absorbed in their fascinating conference, they had not noticed that they had cleared the river tube, completed the subway trip under Manhattan, recrossed the river and had emerged into the open." Now that we're out of Underland, in the clear light of day, I may seem to be the Mad Hatter. You still can back out."

"My flattering concentration ought to be answer enough," she replied. "Still, if you want to know what I think—I don't think you're the Mad Hatter. I think you're the

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Silv'ry Liner. Let's go back to my—factory and plan the Mouse Trap Beautiful."

II.

A FEW weeks later Dexter returned to New York to report that he had leased a wilderness site in an up-State Adirondacks county on the Canadian border. It was several miles from a railroad, but he assured her that when they began manufacturing on a large scale, they could buy motor trucks cheaply at auction up there.

"You see," he explained, "the authorities are constantly seizing cars and trucks, and the owners are too shy to claim them. Maybe that's because of what's found in the trucks when seized. The owners try to bid them in under a blind when possible, because they need those trucks in their business.

"But the authorities often put the owners where they can't bid, and auction off the cars. We'll be able to pick up bargains, Betty.

"You hear lots of truck stories there. One train of them slipped across the border heavily loaded, but when it ran into ambush some miles south of our site, the trucks were empty. The drivers gave the officers such a razz that the sleuths have been hanging close to them ever since. You'll like our wilderness. It's trackless and ideal for us."

"I know I'll love it, Amby," responded Betty, who had been busy organizing her part of the expedition.

They had become Betty and Amby to one another during the few weeks of acquaintance, although maintaining strictly business relations. It had not taken Betty long to rename him "Amby Dextrous," especially after seeing him write with both hands. Her pride of invention calmed when she learned that he had been nicknamed that when he was advertising manager of the college publication, and that he had developed his left hand deliberately in order to live up to the name.

First news of the innovation in mouse trap manufacture reached the city through a story sent in by the rural correspondents of the county. Overnight, they related, a strange new group had set themselves up in the wilderness north of the Village of Meggs. Men and young women calling themselves Trapcrafters had descended on a remote fastness and had put up two portable cutout houses they had brought on trucks.

These houses were the living quarters, one for each sex. A large space between the two dormitories had been reserved for the erection of an artistic log workshop or atelier. Each Trapcrafter wore a blue chambray smock decorated around the bottom hem by a frieze of white mice rampant.

The correspondents had received a mysterious tip that the artistic log workshop might be a disguised road house or freak Greenwich Village "tea room" set conveniently near the border. They had gone out to probe for hidden intent.

They reported that a charming young woman, Betty Randell, had explained frankly the purpose of this unusual organization. Her interview was so interesting that the correspondents had been quite carried away and had thrown themselves into the writing of it.

Trapcrafters were going to make mouse traps, she said. Not just common, dinky mouse traps, but works of art. Traps in the Trapcrafter manner, for mice of the better sort. These traps would be artistic and so alluring that a mouse would gladly pay the supreme price in order to be associated with one. She believed that the time was nearing when owners would boast of their Trapcrafter traps by name, as they did their cars.

Miss Randell, the accounts stated, came by her mouse trap making naturally, as her father had been Cornelius Randell, who, for a generation, had conducted a mouse trap factory in Barclay Street, Manhattan. His daughter, however, intended to raise manufacture to craftsmanship.

"For generations," Betty said in part, "people have tried to protect millions of dollars' worth of food with ten cent traps that any mouse would be ashamed to be found dead in. Ugly wooden deadfalls made without taste or originality, and utterly uninviting to an intelligent, discriminating mouse. The admitted fact that

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mice nibble the finest dainties on the shelves and, when opportunity offers, even gnaw expensive oil paintings, proves that they have a taste for luxuries and art. Why not cater to that taste by providing mouse traps which will tempt mice?

"That is what Trapcrafters will do. Trapcrafters are a band of expressionists who hope to do for this region what the Joycrafters did for East Borealis. They will create the mouse trap which you will want to exhibit proudly to guests. In addition to having the most powerful pick-up and kick, as well as many refinements, this trap will be beautiful.

"Imagine the luxury trap of beautiful white enamel for white enamel kitchen sets. We will experiment in dipping traps in radium paint so that a mouse can see it in the dark.

"It is expecting too much to make a mouse search around for his trap. Too, we believe that the discriminating householder will own these in half dozen lots, throwing away the trap with the caught mouse. Even the dullest mouse recognizes and avoids a trap which has claimed its prey.

"And why not sets? You think nothing of buying a thirty dollar pistol and firing fifty cents' worth of shots to hit a destructive rodent. A new mouse is worth a new trap.

"Also, because Trapcrafters is too long a name to expect customers to remember, my associates have decided to name this trap after me, and have called it the Betty-R Mouse Trap."

There was more of it, but that will serve. Did it go over?

It did. Of twenty dailies in New York, twenty used the mouse trap story when it filtered in from up-State.

Although M. B. Dexter had kept studiously out of sight, he had rehearsed Betty to avoid any reference to Emerson. Guilefully, this was a deliberate challenge to the intelligence of the men through whose hands the story passed.

On twenty copy desks twenty scholarly copy readers were inspired to insert the quotation about the wilderness and to shape their headings to fit Betty-R Mouse Traps and path beating. In other cities this same process was in operation, and thus Betty-R Mouse Traps made their bow in the news columns, free of charge.

On the following day the advertising columns of the best media took up the torch, with plenty of white space and the cryptic phrase:

CHEESE IT!

And on the next day this was explained by:

CHEESE IT—THE BETTY-R MOUSE TRAP AT THE BEST DEALERS

III.

HAVING remained in the city only long enough to see the successful start of his publicity, Amby hurried back to the wilderness, where his fellow Trapcrafters were setting up the workshop. The four real workmen, who had ceased grumbling about leaving New York, still looked sheepish in their smocks.

But Betty and four friends she had lured from Greenwich Village wore them with an air. The "atmosphere extras" were two girl artists and two advanced thinkers who had been intrigued by the idea and by the regularity of meals.

The workshop was being assembled rapidly. A one-story, sloping roofed log building sprawling flat on the ground over a plot fifty by one hundred feet. It resembled a rustic park shelter house, with swinging windows around all sides to light the work benches lining the walls.

"The world hasn't beaten any path-making records yet," reported Betty. "A few villagers came out to stare, but they melted after the first day. All did but that fellow standing over there. His name is Burnam, and he's worried for fear we will be eaten by kindred of the wild, or that we'll spoil the game and poison the water course. First he tried to scare me by saying that bears would interrupt operations. Are there any?"

"There's game up here," conceded Amby. "That's how I struck this spot, while hunting earlier this year. I remember following a blazed trail from the road. Trees

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hacked, you know, and the ground trodden some, as though a big hunting party had marched to this open space. When we decided to have a wilderness, I remembered this place, and leased it from a man in town for a song. Of course, I'm a good singer."

"See here, are you going to spoil our hunting around this region?" demanded the man Burnam, approaching them belligerently.

He was dressed as a hunter, but hardly looked the part. His skin was not tanned, and he had more the appearance of a town dweller.

"There are hundreds of square miles left," placated Dexter.

"Your factory will pollute the creek," objected Burnam.

"We located here to catch water power from that little fall," explained Amby, patiently. "Generate electricity for light and power. The waste—only a little oil and paint—we'll drain off into a tank to be dug here when we enlarge. The ground will purify it."

"Don't you go digging here," warned the man. "It 'll saturate the ground and kill off everything for miles around."

After a few more dire warnings and dark looks, he left. Amby gave him scant heed, his mind being on the next moves in his publicity campaign. This took his attention while the workmen fitted up their factory and the Greenwich Villagers gave it the artistic touch.

The workshop was completed when the photographer Amby had engaged arrived from the county seat. He had orders from the pictorial news services to get all the interesting photographs he could of the queer new Trapcrafters. Also he had Amby stage photographs that would please. Betty's good-looking girl artist friends posed for several picturesque features in which the mouse trap beautiful figured. But Betty herself starred in the photograph which "made" the leading gravure sections.

Among the junk brought up was a stately, battered old grandfather's clock Amby had picked up in an antique shop. For the benefit of the photographers this was set out in the sunshine where Betty perched on a chair beside it. Her face registered pretty alarm, and her hands modestly raised her skirts, exposing clocked hosiery with fancy garters just below the knees.

Dangling from each garter was a white enameled mouse trap, while a third lay on the chair at her feet. On the ground, hesitating between the choice of clocks, was a mouse which had been well fed and trained to pose. To make a variant of this idea, Amby then removed the simple clock works, and Betty stood tightly fitted in the case, with her pretty face where the clock dial had been. This made a tall, narrow photograph adapted for one-column cuts.

Every editor captioned these originally: "Hickory, dickery, dock! Shall mouse try clock or sock?" The subcaptions explained that this was a picture of Betty Randell, head of the Trapcrafters, and inventor of Betty-R Mouse Traps. Some captioneers varied this with droll references to the use of traps for protecting the Flapper's First National Bank. These pictures revived the original interest in Betty-R Mouse Traps before it could wane.

Results were prompt. Big stores and jobbers were writing or wiring inquiries about prices and deliveries. Their customers already had begun to demand the mouse trap beautiful.

The postmaster and the railroad telegrapher at Meggs were considering asking for increases in pay and help. But Amby had other plans. He had prepared a letter which Betty signed and which was sent out to all the Emerson societies in the country, timed for delivery when the first Betty-R publicity broke. This letter urged Emersonians to petition the post office department for the establishment of a postal station for the manufacturing town being reared in the wilderness, to be named Emersonia, New York.

Supporting this plea, the letter told how the Browning societies had built a beautiful, artistic little post office at Pippa Pass, in the mountain wilds of Kentucky, where the government maintained a station. Were the Emersonians going to let an English poet put one over on the great American sage? No! One thousand times no.

Thus incited, Emerson admirers through-

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out the land agitated for the project and spread the fame of Betty-R Mouse Traps. Reports of these activities were made news through the zeal of Emerson club secretaries who took their accounts to the newspapers.

On the heels of this news column publicity, Amby plunged on advertising space to the extent of their dwindling funds. Big city paper readers were advised:

WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY
USE BETTY-R MOUSE TRAPS

Orders and tentative orders were piling up so rapidly that the small plant would be unable to fill them, and their publicity would be in vain. Faced by this prospect, Betty and Amby decided to seek capital which would enable them to expand the original workshop to a group of big plants surrounded by artistic workers' homes. Inasmuch as the local correspondents had been helpful, Amby gave them the first news of the contemplated expansion.

It was good county boom stuff, and the rural scribes spread themselves on prophetic word pictures of the big permanent industrial community which was to grow from what had been humorously regarded as a freak Bohemian camp.

The day this story appeared in print, the Trapcrafters were visited again by Burnam. He had been observed daily, skulking through near-by woods as though hunting, always keeping his eyes on the trappist settlement. This day he came directly to Betty and Amby, offering one thousand dollars if they would sell out.

The offer was laughed to scorn. Burnam justified this reception by gradually raising his bid to four thousand dollars before he departed, muttering vague predictions that they would be sorry.

"Now I wonder why that man is so keen to get rid of us," pondered Betty. "Who is he, anyway?"

"Couldn't learn much about him after he made that fuss the first time," replied Amby. "He's a newcomer here in the last six years, they tell me. No stated occupation. Seems to live on investments of a nature not disclosed, like a number up here. Always has plenty of money to spend on politicians of the buyable kind."

"Well, he can't buy us out," she declared.

Amby went to New York that day to negotiate for capital. In order to push Betty-R Mouse Traps vigorously into public notice, he sent out the Pied Piper. For this rôle he engaged a gloomy and musical Scot, who had a set of pipes from which he could squeeze fearful and doleful sounds rivaling a cats' grand lodge of sorrow.

As befitted such a Class A skirler, Sandy had the necessary scenery—ribboned cap, loud plaid kilts, hairy bare legs, and golf stockings. In place of the usual sporan or Highlander's purse, there dangled from his belt a Betty-R Mouse Trap. He pronounced it "moose."

Having received innocently worded advance releases from Amby, the newspapers announced that a Pied Piper would visit City Hall, pay his respects to any worthy burghers he met there, and then would start piping the mice toward the river. Mothers were assured to have no fear, as all the expenses of this musical treat had been paid, and children would not be lured to the watery plunge in the Hamelin manner.

This was published on a dull news morning, so the Pied Piper was met at City Hall by a full delegation of reporters, photographers and news reel cameramen. The acting mayor and several burghers with eyes to the Scotch vote posed for pictures with the piper, bidding him to de-mouse New York.

Then a literal reporter pointed out that this piper was not visibly pied. So Amby led them to an automat, where he gorged the gloomy Scot on pie. Then he was loosed on the city.

All that pie set up pains in a system trained on oatmeal. For pains the piper knew of but one remedy. How he found it—repeatedly—was a mystery. Headlines in the next day's morning papers agreed that:

PIED PIPER GETS PIE-EYED ON PIE

Evening papers had a new angle. When the police awakened the piper that morning in his cell, they stared at his trap. Sandy had set it on the floor, baited with

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a pie remnant he found in his pocket. Came morn, and there in the Betty-R mouse trap was the police station's pet mouse!

Amby had sent a reporter friend to intercede, but that was not necessary. The magistrate, after airing his knowledge of poetry, commended Sandy as a public benefactor, and fined him the trap. His honor explained that he wanted it to catch the mice which had been nibbling important legal papers in his desk.

This publicity, backed by a stack of orders, enabled Amby to make the financial arrangements for the big expansion.

While he was detained in the city, purchasing material, Amby evolved and staged a demonstration for the press and news reels. He arranged with a vaudeville "animal act" performer to train a white mouse to run eagerly into a Betty-R mouse trap. The mouse was a quick rehearser and the trap's fangs had been drawn. The demonstration was held on a hotel roof before a select company.

The white mouse and white trap on a black velvet cloth thrown over a table made a sharp, clear picture for the cameras. Amby promised that the demonstration would prove Betty-R traps to be irresistible to mice. The movie camera cranks began turning and the mouse frisked gayly toward the trap.

Then came a perfectly distressing interruption. A cat that was not in the secret and that had slipped up unnoticed, pounced on the mouse and ran away with it before any one could interfere. The trainer's threats of a suit cinched the story.

Amby returned to the Trapcrafters in triumph. Within a week building material for the new units was on the ground. Soon the excavators would dig cellars and the foundations of the new shops would be laid. A dynamo hitched to the little waterfall ground out current for lighting and operating the plant and for a small radio broadcaster. As soon as a station license could be obtained for this latter, Betty's poet friends were to broadcast Brother Mouse Tales at Sleepy Time.

Success was in the air. True, the only path beaten as yet was the one made by a flivver which took their deliveries to the railroad, but Betty was hopeful that the world would soon hit the trail.

IV.

LATE one night the following week, Amby returned from the county seat after taking the correspondents a news story, which they assured him would go big. This told of Betty's newest invention, a side line to be called "Mice-nice." Experiments had produced a cake that was to be to mice what catnip is to cats—irresistible. When a trap was baited with Mice-nice, the lure was so great that mice were killed in the rush to be first.

Amby found no taxi at the Meggs station when he alighted. The lonely station agent said that every one, cabmen included, had gone to a dance where the local orchestra alternated with famous jazz bands received via radio. So Amby walked out, thinking dreamily of Betty as he went.

That two-mile stretch was dark and lonely, but he felt safe with his pistol which he had parked with the station agent while away. Then he turned off the road into the scarcely visible flivver trail to the workshop, a half mile through wilderness. Groping along, he was startled to see big black shapes looming ahead. Trucks, with headlights out, bumping cautiously toward the trap factory!

He ran silently on, overtaking the three snailing vans as they crept to a halt near the workshop. A gruff voice asserted:

"'S'all right. Nobody home. We needn't 'a' been so cautious. Be snappy now. Back them trucks around and hook their chains to the shack. Coupla you chop the corner upright posts—they're the only ones stuck in the ground. Then all together with the trucks and chains, and yank the walls off. Or pull the whole damn house over; you oughta be able."

"Get away or I'll shoot!" Betty's voice rang out sharply from the workshop. "We've got you covered. Go!"

"You said 'I' the first time," taunted the man who had given orders. "She's alone. The rest are at the dance. Rush her!"

From the darkness back of the vans a

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pistol barked, and a howl announced that Amby's shot had registered. Taking advantage of the momentary confusion that followed, he circled around them in the darkness, and reached the shop door.

In response to his call, Betty admitted him, slamming the door as a volley of shots pelted after him. Loud, excited commands urged the besiegers to rush the workshop.

"We'll knock over any one who tries," shouted Dexter.

More shots greeted this, but there was no rush. To Betty he added: "Guard one side and I'll guard the other."

"If only we had some way to call for aid," she mourned as they crouched in the darkened workroom, while the mysterious van men sniped from behind trucks and lumber piles. "A telephone—anything—"

"Our radio," he cried, glancing at his illuminated watch dial. "Station KQZ is broadcasting its after-theater dance program now. We've got the same wave length. Pull down the microphone to shelter and try to get your call in on KQZ's time when they stop a minute."

With bullets shattering glass above her, she obeyed. Holding the microphone to her lips, she appealed in a low voice for any near-by radio auditor to rush to their rescue or to notify the officers. A dozen times she repeated it, quitting only to shoot at a man who tried to rush her side of the shop.

Between shots she told Amby that some seemingly hospitable motorists whom she had supposed to be friendly villagers, had lured all the other Trapcrafters to the dance that night.

Help would have to come quickly if they were to escape alive. Shouted orders to kill them on sight were followed by a barrage against one side, under cover of which two shovelers began digging close to that wall. These betrayed their presence when one shouted: "This is too slow." Immediately their shovels smashed in the window above the speaker, and six men sprang in. One fell wounded, but the others landed, shooting—indoors!

The moment these crashed in, Amby rushed Betty to the "blind" end of the room, where they took to cover. A stack of metal sheets, trap material standing on edge, formed their armorplate. Crouched behind it, Betty loaded while Amby fired at the flashes near the door.

As he reached back finally for another loaded pistol, the girl whispered in his ear that he had fired their last cartridge. The foe sensed the fact.

"They're out o' stuff," yelled the gruff-voiced man. "Charge!"

At his shout a half dozen flash lights suddenly illuminated the room, while voices backed by guns, ordered the invaders to surrender. Six State troopers, who had galloped softly up, were behind the guns. They formed only the vanguard. Sheriff's deputies and various other officers followed hotly in all sorts of cars. After them came scores of armed volunteer rescuers.

"'The world will make a beaten path to his door,'" quoted Amby a half hour later, watching hundreds of cars depart, leaving the once dim flivver trail a heavily worn road. Armed officers lingered at the door. "Remember my telling you once about a truck train that crossed the border loaded and was empty when stopped below here? Turns out they were tipped off that night that both ends of the road were covered by officers. So the runners toted the stuff in here and buried it until they could take it away safely. They were watched so closely that they left it, and then we set up here overnight on their cache. A thousand quarts of Scotch, worth ten thousand dollars at least, right under this shack, and we never knew why Burnam was so anxious to move us. He's their local spotter," the wounded man confessed.

"Can't you see the headlines? 'Rum Runners Trapped at Betty-R Trappery.' And sub-heads about the world beating a—ouch!"

Gesturing excitedly in the workroom, he had stuck one finger into a mouse trap lying on a workbench. Betty seized his hand.

"You've trapped me, too," he whispered, thrilling to her touch.

"Shall I release you?" she asked softly.

"Never," replied Amby Dextrous. "Hold both."

THE END

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Where Some Men Are Men

By GEORGE F. WORTS

Author of "Out Where the Worst Begins," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PREVIOUS PARTS

PATRICIA GAILEN, high-spirited Eastern beauty, is heiress to a gold mine near the water tank town of Horseblanket. An extremely bad man, One-Shot Snacker, seizes the property. The girl goes West to oust him. Her lackadaisical, penniless brother, Henry, trails her in a taxicab, but she refuses to pay his bills. Nettie Jarvis, a Western beauty, and her granddad, Pa Jarvis, hotelkeeper, grubstake Henry and then horrify him with their plan of arising at 5 A.M. to wash gravel Patricia Gailen hires Pa Jarvis as personal guard. She also engages Abney, local lawyer and saloonist, as her attorney. Miss Gailen demands a killer to polish off One-Shot Snacker. Loupo the Wolf, Jack the Jumper, and Cockeye, three Horseblanket desperadoes, enthusiastically decline the job. Pa Jarvis inveigles Gordon Manville Stackhouse, visiting novelist, into a boast to kill Snacker. Patricia and the handsome author, notwithstanding their personal scorn of Cupid, fall in love at sight. The Eastern girl collapses when she learns that her adored writer is out gunning for One-Shot Snacker.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN SNACKER'S CLUTCHES.

GORDON MANVILLE STACKHOUSE rode until dawn, stopping only twice during the night, once to consult the map that Pa Jarvis had placed in the saddlebag, and again, shortly after midnight, to eat the sandwiches which Pa Jarvis had prepared.

There was adventure in the crisp night air. The moon, speeding through gossamer clouds, plated the hills and the valleys with the bright silver of romance.

The venturesome young novelist had not been astride a horse for some time, but the mount that Pa Jarvis had rented him was long-limbed and easy-gaited, and the perils of his mission overcame all thoughts of physical fatigue.

The moon was sinking below the horizon when he reached the clump of cottonwoods on the crest of the hill on whose eastern slope the Bluebird mine was situated.

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Darkness followed—darkness so impenetrable that the young man could not see his hand before him. He felt about until he found a tree, then tied the horse to it.

He sat down on a log and went over in his mind the instructions that Pa Jarvis had given him. If they resisted, he must shoot Snacker first, then Slim Wheemer. Old man Gimish and Cowhorn Lenkmarble could be dealt with afterward. The novelist had never shot a man in his life, and the approaching crisis found him uneasy but cool.

In the darkness he extracted and handled his pistols, made sure that there was a cartridge in the firing chamber of each, and that the spare clips in his belt were easily available. His imagination enabled him readily to picture the shooting scene.

The four men lived together in a bunk house near the shaft of the mine. The doorway of the shack faced toward the summit of the hill.

He would wait until they were all outside washing up for breakfast. First he would pick off the one with the head of blazing red hair; then the slim one with the very pale blond hair—if they resisted.

The night was still—so still that, many miles away, he could hear the puffing of a P. and W. freight engine on a stiff up-grade. The puffing stopped and was followed by a nearer sound—a faint buzzing sound. This sound puzzled the novelist for a time, then he realized that it was the snoring of a man.

Poor fellow—he might never snore again. Another dawn, perhaps, would find him cold and still, with his hands folded upon his breast in eternal slumber.

He was filled with sudden compassion for the man—for all four of the men. Struck down in the fullness of life by bullets from the pistols of an unknown man! Well, even in the midst of life we are in death, and he would give them a decent burial.

He was struck by the thought that this thing that he was doing was unfair, but he was cheered by the reflection that, after all, the odds were four to one; and he would give them a fair chance to surrender before he started firing.

Of course he would not shoot them unless they resisted. He would order them to throw up their hands, and when they had obeyed his command he would first disarm them, then rope them all together and drive them ahead of him into Horseblanket. But if they resisted—

Dawn stole eerily through the cottonwoods. The world was dimly alight before he realized that the time was come to be up and doing. He started toward the eastern slope, then turned back impetuously toward the pony which had carried him so many miles, so faithfully, so uncomplainingly. He put his arms about the pony's neck and whispered:

"Adios, old friend! We may never see each other again." There was a catch in his voice. "I—I'm going now. And it's going to be those villains—or me! Adios!"

Tears filled his eyes. The pony examined him suspiciously, revealing the white of one large alert eye.

"You're one of the truest friends I ever had," Gordon spoke again, "and, who knows—maybe the last!" Impulsively he kissed the pony's pink nose.

The pony reared and savagely tried to bite him.

"You ferocious little skunk!" the novelist gasped as he backed hastily away.

His anger stimulated him, but only for a moment. He removed the pistols from the holsters, and, when he had reached the edge of the slope, dropped to his hands and knees and crawled. A cluster of shacks loomed black and ominous against the pale suffusion of dawn.

He was suddenly alarmed to discover an oblong of orange light in the wall of one of them. A window! A lamp burning! He was not a minute too soon. Snacker and his scoundrelly trio were astir!

In minutes those four drowsy men might be lying about in unnatural attitudes. In minutes his automatic would utter its ugly call of death four times—if they did not surrender!

On his belly the young man started sliding down the slope, selecting as his fortress a large bowlder, square in shape, lying in his path about thirty yards from the shack in which the lamp burned.

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When he reached the bowlder he was conscious of a faintness, almost a nausea, in the region of his stomach. His mouth was watery, his brain was numb. Over and over it clicked out the phrase, like a command:

"Shoot the red-headed one first! Shoot the red-headed one first!"

For a moment he was sorry for Snacker, but recollections of the treatment received at the hands of this fiend in human form by the poor wretches who fell into his clutches hardened him. The scoundrel had branded one sheep herder by sitting him on a red-hot stove and holding him there in spite of the tortured man's screams.

He had suspended another man by the big toe. Still another he had held while an accomplice had poured molten lead into the unfortunate's ears.

The sky brightened. In a moment that door would open, the four would file forth and his command would ring out on the still morning air: "Grab a star, everybody!" He would commence firing at their first false move. Snacker, he would shoot through the heart. He dropped his face into his hands, gritted his teeth and groaned.

There was a faint scuffling in the soft dirt behind him. Weakly the novelist lifted his head and turned his drawn white face and stared up with tortured eyes at a tall, lean man.

"Phew! Oh, Lord!" the novelist moaned, and drops of cold perspiration stood out on his pale brow like morning dew, for the man who had crept noiselessly behind him was hatless, and his hair in the light of the rising sun was a blazing red.

Snacker!

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE RIDERLESS HORSE.

PATRICIA paced restlessly to the kitchen window and back to the table where Pa Jarvis was briskly mixing a batch of biscuit dough.

"We must do something, Pa."

"Ain't nothin' t' do, ga' but t' wait and keep a stiff upper lip."

"When is the earliest that he might return?"

"All depends. Ef he stops t' bury 'em, he mightn't be back ontil supper time. Ef he don't stop t' bury 'em, he might be back by th' time th' Flyer comes through. Anyhow, he's got t' give his hoss a rest."

"But you seem so unconcerned about it all!" Patricia cried.

"Well, why not be philosophical 'bout it, gal? They's plenty more brave men in the world, ain't they?"

"I haven't found any of them in Horseblanket!" Patricia retorted angrily. "And I'll never forgive you for deceiving me. You—you sent the only man I ever loved to his death! You could have prevented him!"

"Gal," said Pa cheerily, "them's harsh words. And why sh'd I have prevented him? The dumfool was a champin' at the bit fer trouble. He wanted a real villain fer a novel, and I only done my best fer him. Whut d'ya mean, I sent him to his death? He wasn't a goin' out thar t' his death. He was a goin' to capture or kill One-Shot Snacker, Slim Wheemer, old man Gimish, and Cowhorn Lenkmarble."

"But they are desperate men!"

"Shore they're des-prit men. And ef they once lay hands on him, th' chances are ya'll never recognize him when ya see him ag'in. They'll prob'ly mutilate him somethin' turrible. But don't worry, gal."

"Oh, my God! Don't worry! What shall I do? Oh, what shall I do?"

She paced to the window again, looked out toward the grim, unsmiling hills which had swallowed up Gordon Manville Stackhouse, and shuddered. At this very moment her lover might be suffering some unendurable torture.

She turned from the window with a stifled sob.

"What would they do to him if they captured him?"

Pa turned from his dough mixing with his benevolent smile.

"Well, honey, they're all men of ideas, so it's purty hard to say jest whut they would do. They filled one guy's ears with melted lead. They staked another one out between four stakes—stretched him up off

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the ground with fresh rawhide and let him stay there in the broilin' sun while the rawhide dried up and shrunk. Oh, they treat their victims somethin' scandalous. Did I ever tell ya about th' Easterner an' th' rattlesnake?"

She wailed: "What did they do to him?"

"Shore ya wanta hear?"

"Of course I want to hear!"

"Well, this yere Snacker took a dislike t' th' Eastern feller fer some reason that I don't jest now recollect. Th' Eastern feller'd jest had a nervous breakdown, and he come out yere t' th' West t' rest up."

"And Snacker captured him?"

"Now, jest be patient, gal. The Eastern feller was out a ridin' a hoss when he fell into Snacker's clutches. Snacker drug the feller off home with him. He locked him up in a room with this yere rattlesnake and didn't give th' poor feller no weapon to fight with savin' a sofy piller.

"Ya c'n jest imagine that Easterner, fresh f'm an attack of nervous prostration, havin' t' fight fer his life locked up thar in that room with a savage rattlesnake and nothin' t' pertect hisself with but a sofy piller!"

"How long did the fight last?"

"It lasted fer hours, gal, the rattler a coilin' up and a springin' and th' Easterner savin' his life each time with a timely blow of th' sofy piller, and Snacker lookin' in through a winder a smokin' his pipe and a grinnin'."

"Pa Jarvis," Patricia burst out hotly, "you—you're just making up these stories to torture me!"

"All right, gal, all right," Pa returned in a hurt voice.

"Snacker didn't put that Easterner into a room alone with a rattlesnake and nothing to defend himself with except a pillow! You know it isn't true! Is it?"

"All right, gal, have it yore way. I was jest about t' say that th' Eastern feller—"

"Stop! I think you're horribly cruel! You know how worried I am. You know I love Gordon, and that if anything should happen to him I—I'd simply die!"

"But ya want t' know how it ended, don't ya, gal?"

"Why, the rattlesnake struck him, of course!"

"No, gal, yo're wrong!" Pa said triumphantly. "Th' rattler didn't strike th' feller—not wunst! He staved it off time after time with th' sofy piller, and finally wore th' rattler down till he didn't have a spring left in him. And when Snacker let th' feller out, he was cured."

"Who was cured?"

"Why, th' Easterner."

"What was he cured of?" Patricia gasped.

"His nervous prostration!"

"Oh! Did Snacker let him go then?"

"I dunno, gal, I dunno."

Patricia bowed her head into her hands, and Pa crossed softly to her, wiping his floury hands on his apron. He patted her gently on the shoulder.

"Honey, nothin' ain't happened t' Gordon. D'ya s'pose I'd 'a' let him go out yonder all by hisself ef I didn't know fer shore he was a better man th'n all four o' them low down scoundrels put together? Didn't he tell ya hisself th't he'd won medals in th' army fer his shootin'? He'll be back soon.

"It's nearly time fer th' Flyer now, and I'm a willin' t' bet ya that inside another hour he'll be back with them rascals marchin' ahead o' him or with news jest as good if not better. Thar's fightin' blood in that boy, gal, and—"

Pa stopped with his head cocked to one side in an attitude of listening. Patricia, lifting her face from her hands, listened, too, her eyes shining with expectancy.

"What's that?" she gasped.

"Hoss!" Pa snapped.

They hastened to the kitchen door and outside. A riderless buckskin pony loped into the yard and stopped at the corral with sides heaving. A vine of bright green leaves trailed down from the saddle horn. The reins had been snapped and were hanging on either side of his head. The horse was foam-flecked and shining with sweat. It steamed from him.

Patricia stared at the horse, then at Pa Jarvis.

"Whose horse is that?"

"Why—why—" Pa stammered.

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She seized him by the arm.

"It's one of your horses, isn't it?"

"A-a-ayop!"

"It's the one you rented Gordon, isn't it?"

"Gal—"

"Tell me!"

"Yes, gal, it's hisn. Now don't cry, honey."

"I'm not crying. Oh, I knew this would happen." She clasped her hands and squeezed them against her breast. "It means they've got him, doesn't it? It means that, probably at this moment, they're putting him to some horrible torture!"

She whirled on Pa Jarvis, her violet-blue eyes blazing, her breast rapidly rising and falling, her lips drawn back tightly upon her teeth. "And you're responsible!"

"Honey, that ain't skassly fair!"

"You're an old meddlesome grafter!" she cried. "Gordon has been captured by those scoundrels, and you're responsible!"

Pa Jarvis drew himself up stiffly. "I disclaim th' responsibility," he said with dignity.

"You engineered it! You wouldn't consult anybody!"

"Excuse me, gal, but I was actin' under yore orders. Ya wanted a brave, fearless, red-blooded he man t' go out and drive Snacker and them low-down scoundrels o' his off'n yore prope'ty. I got ya yore man. I got ya a perfect stranger. After I done got him ya went and fell in love with him.

"And now ya blame me. Now ya call me a meddlesome old grafter. Now ya blame me fer lettin' th' only man ya ever loved get hisself caught and tortured by them outlaws. Jest as if I wasn't doin' my poor old best. That's right. Jump on me. I'm jest a poor, helpless old man with nobuddy t' pertect me."

"Oh, stop your whimpering!"

"Then don't git so excited!" Pa shrilled. "And stop passin' th' buck. Whose fault is it, I'd like t' know? Who popped into town with this harebrained scheme to send a man to drive out Snacker and his gang?"

"I won't argue," Patricia snapped. "So far you've done nothing but talk and—and think up ways of getting my money. What I want now is some action. *You* are going out to the Bluebird and rescue Gordon!"

"Me?"

"Yes, you!"

Pa looked at her with surprise and pity.

"Me go out thar and git my old ears poured fulla lead? Why, gal, yo're losin' yore reason. C'n ya pitcher me hangin' f'm a cottonwood by my big toe? C'n ya see me gettin' branded by bein' set on a red-hot stove or fightin' a rattlesnake with a sofy piller? Gal, I got too much respect fer my dignity."

"Well, what are we going to do?" Patricia snapped.

"Wait," said Pa.

"Wait!" she wailed.

"Shore! Yo're makin' a mountain outa a molehill, honey. I c'n give ya a dozen reasons why this hoss sh'd come home 'thout Gordon—a dozen *good* reasons."

"Give me just one!"

"Well, most likely he tied this hoss t' a tree, and when he begun shootin' the hoss got scairt, snapped th' reins and bolted fer home. Th' buckskin's gun-shy."

"What if that isn't the true reason?"

"Let's look in th' saddlebag. Mebbe he put a note in thar."

They examined the saddlebag. It contained nothing but the map that Pa had put there the night before.

"My fust reason stands," said Pa. "Th' boy's done shot Snacker and th' rest of his gang, and th' shootin' scairt th' hoss away. When Gordon finishes buryin' 'em, he'll ride back on one o' Snacker's hosses.

"He's a purty cool-headed article, that boy. Most likely he'll take a look around, t' see ef they've been a-gettin' out any gold. He'll nachally want to come back with a detailed report fer ya, honey."

Patricia looked at him thoughtfully.

"Well, it sounds convincing," she admitted presently.

"O' coss it sounds convincin'! I know whut I'm talkin' about. I know this country. Ya seem t' fergit I'm an old Indian hunter—a bosom pal o' Kit Carson. Why, I c'd tell ya instances o' deductions th't Kit and I and Buffalo Bill made—"

"You needn't," Patricia headed him off.

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"What I want to know is, what are you going to do now?"

"I'm a-goin' t' wait," said Pa briskly. "Ya're fergittin' th' boy's a goin' t' be plumb wore out f'm his all-night ride and f'm diggin' graves fer all o' them big men. I won't begin worryin' until to-morrow noon. Let th' pore lad have a rest. Ef he don't show up by to-morrow noon, we'll organize a expydition and go git him."

She sighed. "Very well. We'll wait until to-morrow noon." She gave Pa Jarvis a long, not very complimentary look. "This is the country where men are men. If Gordon is not here by noon sharp to-morrow, I am relying on you to find me men who will make that boast good."

"Leave it to me, gal; the West is crawlin' with men who are men—hard-ridin', hard-fightin', two-fisted, red-blooded he-men."

He attended her departure toward her room with a troubled frown. With one hand he meditatively scratched his silvery thatch, while with the other he stroked his snowy beard. The darkness of anxiety in his bright blue eyes deepened. Somehow, he told himself, he must find a way of cashing in on this new crisis. But how? How?

CHAPTER XXX.

A HOLIDAY ENFORCED.

THE Yellow Flyer came, drank its daily allotment of water, and went. The three bad men, finishing their stint at the depot, returned to the hotel and discussed the situation in low tones. They even debated the possibility of throwing up their jobs with the P. and W. for the sake of Patricia and her novelist lover.

"It ain't that I ain't a-willin' t' go," Loupo the Wolf cautiously expressed himself. "And it ain't that I'm scairt of One-Shot Snacker or Slim Wheemer."

"Hell, no," Cockeye put in hastily. "None of us ain't scairt o' them low-down scoundrels."

"It jest means," Loupo went on gloomily, "that ef we ondertake t' help this leetle lady, we'll each lose a good lifelong job. Mr. Ott done told me last time he sent my check that th' job was good as long as th' P. and W. had cyars and engines t' pull 'em."

Jack the Jumper gazed sadly across the sand at their daily rendezvous.

"It 'd mean th' bad men's convention don't come off—fer us. We won't be delegates—that's all."

"And we won't be eligible fer th' grand bad man's prize yere next fall," Cockeye added dolefully, "or th' popularity contest."

Loupo injected a cheering note.

"Boys," he said, "we're wastin' a lot o' worryin' over nothin' at all. That novelist ain't no fool. He was a brave man or he wouldn't 'a' gone out thar. Ef he ain't back yere by to-morrow noon we c'n begin t' worry then."

"We c'n dope out somethin'," Cockeye suggested.

"Shore! Let's quit worryin'."

They fell to discussing the pretty girls they had flirted with on the afternoon's flyer. Darkness crept over the hills. The hot riverlike gale from the Dead Man Desert faded to a slight breeze, which swiftly became cool. A light burned in the station—the only light visible in an immensity of dusk. The clicking of the telegraph instrument came clearly through the darkness.

"Jest listen t' that dum thing a-clatterin' away!" Loupo the Wolf muttered.

"I ain't heard it so brisk since war was declared," Cockeye agreed.

"Mebbe they's another war!" Jack the Jumper suggested. "Le's roam over and see whut's goin' on."

The three bad men unperched themselves from the porch rail, absently made and lighted cigarettes, and drifted over to the station. The little waiting room was filled with the clattering of the instrument, and the station agent, with yellow hair rumpled, was bending over it. There was a tenseness in his attitude.

"Whut's th' racket about?" Cockeye called from the doorway.

The station agent threw up a hand for silence. Presently he gasped:

"Big washout somewhere between yere and Denver. Wait a minnit!"

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The clattering continued.

"Big piece o' track washed out by a rise o' th' Snarlin' River!"

Loupo the Wolf, Cockeye, and Jack the Jumper exchanged glances.

"That's two hundred miles due east o' yere," Cockeye whispered.

"Wait a minnit! Yere's more! Cloudburst in th' Snarlin' River district washed out purty near a quarter mile o' track jest below Outlaw Junction! Wait a minnit!"

There was more clattering.

"Yere's some more. Report f'm wreckin' crew states th' Snarlin's still risin'. No chance t' begin wreckin' b'fore mornin'. Wait a minnit! Yere's th' division sup'intendent talkin' on th' line now. Well, holy mackerel, whuttya know about that?"

"Whut's th' sup'intendent a-sayin'?" hissed Cockeye.

"All trains notified to stop at th' nearest big town and wait fer orders. Station agents instructed t' notify all expectant passengers—say, whut th' Sam Hill's an expectant passenger?—all expectant passengers that train service eastbound and westbound on this division will be delayed thutty-six hours if not forty-eight."

The telegraph instrument became silent.

"Is that all?" Jack the Jumper inquired.

Loupo the Wolf slapped him heartily between the shoulder blades.

"Yowee! Ain't it enough? It means us three gits a holiday—th' fust vacation we've done had in y'ars. Yowee!"

"Say, Loupo," Cockeye broke in sourly, "where at d'ya git this yowee stuff? Whuttaya mean, holiday? It means if that lunkhead of a novelist don't come back by t'-morrow noon sharp, *we* got t' go up thar and git him!"

The three bad men exchanged thoughtful glances.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MYSTERIOUS MESSAGES.

PA JARVIS, in the kitchen, busied himself with supper preparations, opening cans of this and that and setting them on the stove to heat, preparatory to being dumped into platters and served. He heard the three bad men depart for the station.

Frowning at his labors, he hummed softly to himself. He was thinking, marshaling every atom of inventiveness at his command, trying to work out some scheme whereby he could reap benefits from the lamentable plight of Gordon Manville Stackhouse.

The girl in the Mark Twain room was weeping. At intervals throughout the afternoon he had heard her sobs. How could he turn that flood of tears into a flood of fifty-dollar bills? Such wealth almost within reach of his fingers was maddening.

And suddenly his mental processes were interrupted by a thudding of a horse's hoofs in the soft sand without.

He glanced at the greasy window and hastened to the doorway. The lamp on the table behind him sent a broad beam of yellow light out across the sand toward the corral.

A man on a black mustang moved into the light. His sombrero was pulled over his eyes, but tufts of yellowish hair protruding from holes in the crown identified him to Pa's alarmed gaze as Slim Wheemer, Snacker's right-hand man.

Slim Wheemer had one hand on the butt of a pistol; in the other hand he waved a white square—an envelope.

Pa Jarvis had never liked Slim Wheemer, and Slim Wheemer had never liked Pa Jarvis.

"Come yere, yo' old shorthorn!" Slim growled in muted accents.

Pa hopped over the sand toward him.

"Keep yore hand away f'm that thar gun," he snapped.

"Aw, I don't aim t' waste no lead on yore wuthless hulk," the miner spat out contemptuously. "I'm a-savin' my lead fer men."

"Whut ya want, Wheemer?"

"Yere's two messages. One's fer that gal; one's fer you. Read yourn quick and give me a yes or no—pronto."

Pa accepted the two envelopes. One, in an unfamiliar hand, was addressed to Miss Patricia Gailen, Horseblanket. The other bore his own name. He opened that one, glanced down both sides of the sheet of

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note paper it contained, and returned to the horseman.

"Whut's th' answer, ya old rattlesnake?" Slim grated.

"The answer," Pa snapped, "is yes. Now, git to hell offn my prope'ty!"

The horseman dug spurs into his mount and vanished into the night.

With a deeply corrugated brow, Pa Jarvis returned to the kitchen. Closing all the doors, Pa sat down beside the light and read the note from Snacker again. Then he opened the other envelope, read the note it contained with narrowed eyes, lifted a lid from the stove, and dropped the note within.

The two envelopes followed. The note from Snacker he folded up, stuffed into his shirt pocket, and carefully buttoned the flap down upon it.

"I won't tell her," he muttered under his breath. "No, by Gawd, I won't say a word t' her! Now, where in hell am I a-goin' to git me some men?"

His prayer was immediately answered. Loupo the Wolf, Cockeye, and Jack the Jumper filed into the kitchen. Determination shone in the evil faces of the three.

"Tell him, Loupo," Cockeye urged.

"Pa," said Loupo, "if that saphead of a novelist don't git back yere by noon sharp to-morrow, us three boys 're goin' out thar and git him. They's been a washout up the line on Snarlin' River, jest below Outlaw Junction. Th' flyer won't git through fer thutty-six t' forty-eight hours. We're a-goin up now and tell that leetle lady that our six-guns is at her disposal."

Pa wiped his hands on his apron.

"Now, don't you boys go off half cocked, thataway," he said sternly. "Of coss, we'll go out and fight Snacker. I jest done heard f'm Snacker."

"Whut!" they chorused.

"I'm a-tellin' ya! Slim Wheemer jest rode into town with a message fer me f'm Snacker. Read it yoreselves."

He extracted the note from his pocket, and the three bad men, in turn, read it.

Loupo was the first to recover from the stunning surprise of it.

"We'll go, b' God!" he snapped. "You two boys with me?"

"I'm in," said Cockeye.

"Me, too," grunted Jack the Jumper.

"Don't say nothin' of this, now or later, t' th' gal," Pa urged them.

"Why not?"

Pa threw up his hands with despair

"Ain't she got enough on her mind already?"

"Shore, Pa, but—"

"Won't she be all the gladder when we rescue that fathead fer her?" Pa demanded.

"Shore, but—"

"Now, jest supposin' you sapheads do a leetle listenin'. Am I a-runnin' this show, or ain't I? Haven't I done fixed everything up so's this thing c'd be pulled off?"

"Whuttaya mean," Loupo growled, "ya fixed it up? How about th' washout? I reckon I'd call that an act o' God, Pa."

"Shore! God's always on th' side o' th' righteous. Now, look yere. We're all a goin' to git in on this fight that he's challenged us to, and they ain't no reason why we shouldn't git paid real money fer it, *sabe?* Now, whut I was about t' suggest—"

He stopped. The kitchen door had opened. Nettie, followed closely by Henry, entered and looked inquiringly about the circle of frowning faces.

"Whut's the matter, Pa?" Nettie wanted to know. "Why ain't supper ready? Henry 'nd me're plum all in. And we didn't even strike color to-day. Look at pore Henry."

They looked at poor Henry. Henry's face was a tomato red. It was swollen.

"Whut hit him?" Cockeye gasped.

"Sunburn! Ain't it a pity! Pore boy, wait yere, Hennery, while I trot up and git ya some lotion to put on it."

"Wait a minnit!" Pa snapped. "There is some big doin's afoot. In th' fust place, that novelist feller ain't come back yet!"

"Snacker got him!" Nettie gasped.

"In the next place," Pa enumerated, "they's been a washout up the line on th' Snarlin' River, and they won't be trains through fer f'm thutty-six t' forty-eight hours. Loupo, Jack and Cockeye 've got a holiday. We're all goin' up t' fight Snacker."

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"Me?" said Henry.

"Yes, son, and Nettie. Every one of us. Yere's a note jest now delivered into my hand by Slim Wheemer. Read it yoreself."

Nettie and Henry, heads together, read the note. When she had finished it, Nettie clenched her fist and shook it at the ceiling.

"We're in this, Henry. Have ya told Henry's sister?"

"Nope. Ain't goin' to. Why upset th' pore child more th'n she is?"

"But, Pa—"

"Besides, she's been offerin' big money fer men t' go out thar and fight Snacker and his gang. No reason why we shouldn't all git in on this money. Nettie, hustle along and tell Ham Abney to come over."

Nettie went over to the Last Chance, and returned with the lawyer. She explained the situation to him as they came.

"Will ya go, Ham?" Pa snapped.

"Let me see that note f'm Snacker fust," said Ham.

When he had read the note he, too, clenched his fist and shook it at the ceiling.

"Shore! Count me in! That fight's jest my meat? Have ya told th' gal?"

"No, and we ain't goin' to tell th' gal. Boys, won't it seem jest like th' good old days t' fight a pitched battle agin?"

There was a chorus of affirmatives. Only Henry looked dubious.

"I don't want to," he whined.

"Ya won't git hurt, Henry," Nettie soothed him. "I'll look out fer ya."

"Now," said Pa, looking about him, "they's no reason at all why we shouldn't all collect big money fer this."

"From whom?" asked Henry.

"Yore sister, son."

"Sure! Go to it!" Henry cried.

"She's been a-clamorin' fer men—hard-ridin', straight-shootin', red-blooded he-men, t' go out after Snacker. Now I've got her a gang, and it's only fair fer her to pay th' price. Ain't it fair?"

"Shore, it's fair!" Nettie exclaimed.

"But she's sech a sweet leetle lady," Loupo objected.

"Shore!" Pa agreed. "She's a sweet leetle lady with a income of a thousand bucks a week."

"It ain't so!" Cockeye gasped.

"Ask Hennery."

They turned to Henry.

"Tell me it ain't so," Cockeye insisted.

"It's so," said Henry vindictively.

"And yo're a-makin' her pay high fer ya, ain't yer, son, after th' way she done mistreated ya?" Pa encouraged him.

"You bet I am!"

"There ya are," said Pa. "Her own brother says she oughta pay high. Is it all agreed fer me t' go ahead and negotiate th' terms?"

No one dissented.

"Don't fergit," Pa put in hastily, "that I'm t' collect th' usual agent's commission f'm one and all—thutty-three and a thud per cent. Nettie, trot up and ask th' sweet leetle lady t' come down fer th' conference. Cockeye—Loupo—light them lamps in th' dinin' room. Reckon you boys got plenty ammynition fer all of us?"

"I got plenty cached away," said Loupo grimly.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE GRAFTER'S GOLCONDA.

PATRICIA GAILEN had spent a miserable afternoon, reviewing the events of the last few days and pondering the uncertain future. She knew that Pa Jarvis had spoken naught but the truth when he had accused her of being responsible for the plight of her novelist lover.

Why had she not permitted the law to take its course? Why had she rushed in so recklessly? It was all her fault.

And now—now Gordon Manville Stackhouse was at the mercy of those brutes. Over and over she vowed never to let him again out of her sight if he could only be restored once more to her arms.

Only last night—just about this time—he had held her and kissed her again and again after asking repeatedly with boyish shyness if she believed in love at first sight. For the first time in many years she prayed.

Hers was not a religious nature; she was too "modern" for that. But now she prayed devoutly.

For the last half-hour she had heard

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voices rising in a blur of alarming sound from the vicinity of the kitchen. When Nettie knocked sharply at her door she leaped up from the bed and hastily dried her eyes.

"What is it?" she panted.

"Pa wants ya downstairs right away," the Western girl informed her curtly.

"Won't you come in, Nettie?"

"No, thanks; I've got to oil up my gun. There's goin' t' be a fight."

"A fight!"

"Over that novelist of yourn. Come on down and find out about it." The footsteps retreated.

Patricia found her way downstairs in the darkness. The dining room, when she entered it, was filled with the most industrious activity. Men were sitting about on chairs and on the floor, cleaning and oiling pistols. Even Henry was so engaged upon a rusty weapon, a can of oil standing at his knee.

She suveyed the warlike scene with dilating eyes.

"We're startin' at moonup to fight a pitched battle with Snacker and his gang," Pa informed her crisply.

"You've had news!" Patricia exclaimed.

"Yes, gal, we've had news. It come in th' form of a insultin' note f'm Snacker delivered into my hand by th' lowest down scoundrel unhung. It's nothin' more nor less than a declaration o' war. A challenge to a pistol fight. We fight them scoundrels with th' last drop of our blood at sunup!"

"May I see the note, Pa?"

"Gal, I done destroyed that scurrilous note. It was wrote in langwidge not fit fer a leetle lady like you."

"Is Gordon still alive?"

"Yes, gal."

"Are they tor-torturing him?"

Loupo started to speak, but Pa hastily answered her question.

"Not yet, gal, at all events. And we're a-goin' out thar now and git him fer ya! It's a fight t' th' death, gal. Jest like th' good old days."

"Are all of you going?"

"Ayop!"

"Henry?"

She looked at her brother and her brother squinted up at her through the cleaned and oiled barrel of a .45. She hardly recognized him. Henry's face was red and somehow hard-looking. There was something in his eyes that she had never seen there before. Had the raw, unspoiled West made Henry a man so soon?

"Well," said Henry coldly, "for a consideration. I'm not taking my life in my hands for nothing, believe me, Pat; not after the deal you handed me the other night."

"Oh, of course," Patricia agreed bewilderedly.

"Fer a consideration," Pa took up briskly, "Henry's a-goin' out thar t' fight fer yore lover an' t' fight fer yore land. Ya might say, gal, that I'm sort of managin' this expedition—th' financial arrangements, anyhow."

"Yes, you would be," Patricia assented.

"And I want ya to know that I don't hold them hard words ag'in' ya that ya spoke this afternoon."

"That's very charitable of you," said Patricia. "I knew you'd find some way to swindle me out of more of my money. Well, state your proposition, Pa. You've got me where you want me this time, haven't you?"

Pa stared at her with pained surprise. "Them's the cruelest words ye've spoke to me yet, gal. Somehow yo're givin' me th' impression that ya don't like me. And that hurts, gal. I thought we'd been all over this before.

"Ain't I th' political boss o' this yere community? Ain't I been bendin' my every effort t' do fer ya jest whut ya wanted done? Didn't I find a man fer ya t' go out t' th' Bluebird?"

"Ain't I rounded up a gang o' red-blooded, hard-shootin' he-men t' go out there now and wipe up?"

Patricia sat down and faced him. She eyed him with cold dislike. She said something under her breath concerning a land where men were men.

Pa glared at her, assuming that she had vilified him again. Slowly he shook his head and gazed about the room for sympathy, of which none was forthcoming. He smote his knee.

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"Ya've called me a grafter wunst too often, gal," he said in a low, venomous tone. "Th' deal's off!"

"What!" Patricia leaped to her feet.

"That's whut I say! Th' deal's off. They ain't nobody a-goin' out t' rescue yore novelist, ma'am. I've taken all th' insults a man c'n stand. Ya've doubted me. Ya've abused me! Ya've heaped insult onto insult. I'm only human. I've got pride. I'm a proud man, ma'am."

He wheeled on the bad men. "You boys done heard what I said? Whut I say goes. I reckon I ain't th' political boss o' this section fer nothin'. Nobody's a-goin' out t' th' Bluebird mine. Put up yore guns. Good night!"

Pa started from the room with dignity, his head back so far that his beard jutted out. There was the wrath of injured pride in his eyes, and the dignity of a monarch in his bearing.

As he passed a chair his apron caught on a protruding nail; the chair swung in between his legs. He tripped and crashed against a table. When he had resumed his upright position and something of his dignity he glared defiantly about the room.

"Where are you going, Pa?" Patricia wailed.

"To my kitchen, where I belong," he snarled. "Out t' my kitchen, t' keep on a-scrabblin' and a-muckin' fer my livin', cookin' meals and sweepin' up and slavin' and wearin' my old fingers to the bone fer —fer people whut don't know whut the milk o' human compassion looks like. *That's* where I'm a-goin'!"

"Pa," Patricia cried, "come back here this minute."

He wheeled. "I'm goin' where I belong, back t' my pots and pans. *They* won't call me no names. That's where I'm a-goin'!"

"Pa, won't you let me apologize?"

"Jest an old scullery maid is all I'm fit to be!"

"Pa, won't you let me say I'm sorry?"

"Sorry!" Pa shrilled. "Listen to her! And you lumps a-settin' around and a-lettin' a strong, able-bodied gal pick on a pore old man like me! Ain't ya ashamed o' yoreselves!"

"Look here, Pa," Hamilton Clay Abney put in placatingly, "the gal's done said she's sorry. Let be, Pa, let be."

"Let be!" Pa shrieked, striding back into the room and shaking his gnarled old fists. "Ya tell me t' let be when I'm insulted and shamed and put upon in my own dinin' room!"

"Oh, Pa, please let me apologize!" Tears of despair had sprung into Patricia's big blue eyes.

He turned on her sternly, his bushy white eyebrows bristling, his beard bristling, every hair in his silvery thatch bristling.

"Jest whut did ya mean then, ma'am?"

"You know, Pa, I'm nearly distracted over Gordon. You know how fond I am of you. I—I just think you're a—a darling. You know I do!"

"Ya'll never call me a grafter agin?" Pa demanded.

"Oh, never, I promise, I promise!"

Pa resumed his chair. "All right then, whut's yore propasition?"

"You win," she said faintly. "What is it?"

"Make me an offer, gal— a lump offer. And remember all these yere men are takin' their lives in their hands fer ya. Human life don't come cheap, gal. And some o' these men are experts in this game we're a-goin' t' play t'morrow.

"Yere's Loupo the Wolf an' Cockeye an' Jack th' Jumper, bad men and deadly men with hair-trigger tempers, and so fast on th' draw that ya don't know whut's a-happenin' ontil their weapons begins a-spittin' death an' destruction. Ain't a one of 'em that ain't kilt his ten men. Ain't a one of 'em that don't love th' smell o' burned powder and th' screamin' o' bullets more'n most mothers love the babes in their arms.

"Look at them three deadly men, gal, settin' there jest a-itchin' t' pump lead into these yere enemies o' yourn! Is any price too high fer them? I ain't speakin' o' myself. Ham Abney, how many men have I mowed down with whistlin' lead and razor-edged steel in th' fullness o' their lives?"

"Thutty-two," said the lawyer promptly.

"Thutty-two men, ma'am, I've laid down myself into ontimely graves! And Ham's yere's a killer o' th' most des-prit character.

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They's some parts o' th' West where women blanch with terror and strong men tremble when th' name o' Wildcat Abney is mentioned.

"Nettie ain't yet killed her man, and I reckon Henry ain't neither. But they're young and they're willin'. Go on and make me a price on the lot, gal."

"Two hundred dollars a head," Patricia snapped.

"Oh, my Gawd, jest listen t' her, boys! Two hundred dollars a head fer th' toughest, hardest-ridin', straightest-shootin', most dangerous and des-prit gang o' men that's prob'ly ever been gathered together under one roof in the entire hist'ry o' the West! Don't laugh at her, boys, 'cause she means right. But two hundred bucks! I ask ya!"

"Two fifty," said Patricia angrily.

"Two fifty th' lady offers! But she don't mean t' insult us, boys. It's jest that human life out where she comes from is so cheap. Ya seem t' fergit, gal, that this is th' country where men are men, and the prices range accordin'. No, whut do I hear?"

"Two seventy-five," Patricia said faintly.

"Two seventy-five th' lady wants t' pay, boys. I reckon they ain't a-goin' to be no fightin' to-morrow after all. No red-blooded he-man of the wide open spaces is a-goin' t' hazard his life fer no sech pin-money. I reckon the deal's got t' fall through, boys. I reckon th' leetle lady—"

"Three hundred—that's final," Patricia snapped.

"Sold!" Pa cried. "Three hundred bucks a head it is! Finish oilin' up yore shootin'-irons, boys, fer we're a-goin' to start when the moon peeps her head above th' hills. Th' money, ma'am, is payable strictly in advance, as has always been the law from time immaterial. Seven times three hundred is jest twenty-one hundred bucks, ma'am. Ya can pay me now."

Patricia opened her purse and extracted twenty-one one-hundred-dollar golden-backed notes which Pa graciously accepted.

"Ya'll get yore money's worth, gal, I promise ya. Ya'll see a fight in th' mornin' that'll remind ya of the newspaper stories ya used t' read o' Verdoon and Chatty Terry, only it'll be chuck full o' the kind o' dools whut've made th' West famous fer its darin'!"

"But I don't care about duels," Patricia protested. "All I want to see is G-Gordon!"

"Oh, ya'll see him, honey, safe and sound and bright and shinin' as a new dollar. Now step this way, boys, while I pay ya off."

The six members of the expeditionary force followed their general into the kitchen, where Pa paid them according to agreement, extracting from the pay of each the agent's usual commission of thirty-three and one-third per cent. The $900 he had profited by the transaction he added to the slush fund in his hip pocket.

"Remember, boys," he warned them, "we're t' fight fer the leetle lady t' th' death. Shoot when ya see th' whites o' their eyes, as usual. There ain't goin' t' be no quarter, and th' battle ain't goin' t' stop till one side or th' other is wiped out clean. I'm dependin' on every man t' do his dumbdest!" He dropped his voice to a harsh whisper for the parting injunction.

"Holy cats!" Henry groaned when its meaning became clear to him.

Nettie patted him on the arm. "Don't worry, Henry, I'll be thar t' look after ya."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A SURPRISE BY DAWN.

THE little force that was to grapple with the illegal possessors of the Bluebird mine and the captors of Gordon Manville Stackhouse set out with a creaking of leather, a rattling of armament and a thudding of eager hoofs when the moon came up. Only one man was left in Horse-blanket—the station agent.

Pa Jarvis, with his old .45 buckled to his belt, a sheath-knife inserted between belt and shirt, led the cavalcade. In the light of the rising moon the spectacle was impressive if not sinister.

Patricia glanced anxiously from face to face. There was a grimness about them, a different set to their shoulders, something ominous even in the way they wore their sombreros.

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The rasping of leather, the tinkling of spurs, and the rattling of steel reminded her of stories she had read of the old West, where men banded together to fight to the death for some honest cause. Even Henry, bouncing about in his saddle on the claybank, won from her a certain rather begrudged admiration.

Little was left now of the citified Henry who had come whining to Horseblanket a few days ago with a taxicab bill of $186.40. In the clothing that Nettie had exhumed for him Henry looked like a bad man. He looked tough.

Patricia Gailen spurred her dappled bay forward until she was riding beside Pa Jarvis, with Loupo the Wolf on the other side. They were talking, but fell silent when she drew abreast.

"What is the plan?" she asked.

"Loupo and me've jest been discussin' it," Pa answered in curt, business-like tones. "Pull up close beside me, gal, and I'll give ya the dope."

Even Pa was changed by some strange alchemy. He was no longer a petulant old grafter. For the first time since she had known him, Pa acquired a sense of dignity and manliness.

With the pale moonlight flooding his hairy white face, he became a grand old man—a romantic warrior of the old West, a companion of Kit Carson, a pal of Buffalo Bill.

The moonlight glinted on the steel at his belt. He might have been the shade of the oldest settler—one of those brave pioneers of the covered wagon days.

She listened to him now with a new-born respect and fondness. Even if he was a grafter, she loved Pa.

"Ya see, both Loupo and me've had consid'able experience in this sort o' warfare. Th' best thing t' do is t' catch 'em by surprise, o' coss. We aim to catch th' scoundrels by su'prise, and we aim t' catch 'em so's they cain't strike a blow. Right, Loupo?"

"Pa's right," Loupo affirmed. "He knows."

"The lay o' th' land," Pa proceeded, "is thisaway. Th' Bluebird, as ya know, is on th' slope of a hill—a right smart grade runnin' down f'm the west t' th' east. On top o' this hill is a cluster o' cottonwood trees."

"I see," Patricia gasped. "You'll gather in the cottonwoods and charge down the hill!"

"That jest shows ya how much ya got t' learn of Western warfare, gal. We don't gather in th' trees, and we don't go chargin' down no hills. Ef we was t' charge down th' hill we'd have th' light o' the mornin' sun plumb in our faces.

"This hill I'm a-speakin' of runs down f'm th' cottonwoods at a right smart grade. Mebbe a hondred yards f'm the top is th' Bluebird shaft with th' stamps and so on clustered about it. Fifty feet t' th' right—that's t' th' north o' the shaft-house and stamps—is another cluster o' shacks, where the men live.

"All around them shacks is clear, wide open space. To escape f'm the bunkhouse a man'd be in easy shootin' distance fer at least them fifty feet. And he ain't got nowhere else t' run savin' up th' hill or to th' north, sabe?

"We aim to spread out in a thin line t' the east, facin' th' west. The sun'll be at our backs. We'll have plain, straight shootin'. This is going t' be a sight like nothin' ya've ever seen before, gal—a typical fight o' the old West—'specially if Snacker and them low down scoundrels o' his'n put up any kind o' fight—tricks th't th' West has been a-learnin' since th' fust trapper went through.

"Ya'll be s'prised at some o' the stunts pulled off, gal—stunts o' warfare ya won't find anywheres in the world but out yere in th' West. Th' only thing we have t' fear is an ambush. Loupo, jest supposin' you ride on ahead, say a hondred yards, and keep yore eyes peeled fer an ambush."

Pa turned about in his saddle and called down the line:

"Unlimber yore guns, men, and be ready fer an ambush. Now, gal; I want ya t' promise me somethin'. Don't do no shootin'—have ya ever shot off a pistol?"

"No, Pa," Patricia gasped.

"Then ya're more'n apt'n not t' kill one of our own men. Ya better drop back t' th' end o' the line and stay thar. I don't want nothin' t' happen t' *you*."

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They pressed on, up hill and down, fording creeks, scrambling through black and echoing cañons. They paused for lunch and to rest the horses in the same coulee where Gordon had stopped only twenty four hours before. The moon was still bright when they reached the environs of the Bluebird.

They left the horses in a little gulley in the valley below the long sloping shoulder of the hill. The sinking moon picked out the setting as Pa had described it to Patricia. There was the clump of trees at the crest of it. Some distance down was a black gash in the grayness.

To the right of that was a dark clump—the shaft house and the stamp mill. To the right of that was another, smaller, clump; and with a frantically beating heart she saw that a light was dimly burning in a window. Perhaps Gordon was in there!

Pa was walking beside her.

"At the first sound of a shot or th' flash of a gun, drap down behind the nearest rock. Ya see now why we picked out this side t' attack from, gal? All them big scattered rocks this side o' th' shacks makes puffect cover. We're a-goin' to scatter now behind them rocks."

"When will you begin to shoot?" Patricia whispered.

"At th' fust ray o' sunlight. And he won't be expectin' us till around noon."

"But—but what about Gordon?"

"He's th' only reason, gal, why we wait fer th' sun. Ef it wa'n't fer him, we'd riddle them shacks now. We'd riddle 'em so's not a solitary rat, mouse or cockroach'd be alive after five minnits of it, gal. I've gave th' men strict instructions not t' fire if they's the slightest chance o' hittin' th' boy."

"But they may use him as a shield."

"They might, gal, and I've figgered on that, too. But mebbe we'll catch 'em by surprise. That's what I'm a-calculatin' on. Stop yere, gal."

They stopped, with the bunkhouse less than one hundred feet away. To left and right of her Patricia saw the members of the expedition crawling behind rocks. The rock which she and Pa had chosen was ideal for the purpose. It was nearly five feet square, and it was cleaved thinly down the middle. The crack was only an inch wide, but by peering through it she could see the shack, and the chances of a bullet finding its way through so slight an aperture were very slim.

She glanced to the right and left—and shivered. The men were lying on their stomachs just as she had imagined men would lie in warfare of this kind. Behind the rock on her right was Loupo the Wolf. Beyond him lay Cockeye. Behind the next rock was Jack the Jumper.

She thrilled with a sudden affection for them. Three desperadoes! Why, they were nothing but the three musketeers in the garb of the heroic West! Three musketeers, prepared to lay down their lives for a noble cause and a lady!

And to the left of her, likewise prone, lay Hamilton Clay Abney, the shy and retiring proprietor of the Last Chance saloon; Nettie Jarvis, that plucky little prospector, and Henry—the Henry she no longer knew, a Henry with a new manner, with something of the West's own ruggedness and toughness in his bearing.

If Gordon were only here beside her! What wonderful material for his novels this fight would give him! She eyed the dimly lighted window with awe and fear. No doubt he was in that room now, tied hand and foot, bravely awaiting his rescue. She only hoped that they weren't torturing him.

"Oh, Pa, won't morning ever come?"

"Look yonder," Pa suggested.

She looked. She had been unaware that the moon had gone; that the only ray of light in the gloom was provided by the dimly lighted window in the shack. Now, on the eastern horizon, a pallid glow was spreading. It brightened to yellow. Tendrils of softer color, orange and rose, wound up from the crisp outline of the distant mountaintop.

The stars vanished. A bird chirped. A chilling breeze crept down the hillside, but the world was filling with a golden reviving glow.

Pa Jarvis lifted his pistol to the top of the bowlder and sighted along it.

"Ready, men?" he whispered harshly.

Down the line of bowlders came the answering whisper.

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And suddenly the hillside before them was bathed in a soft pink radiance.

"Fire!" Pa roared.

A volley from seven pistols crashed out. It echoed and re-echoed from hilltop to hilltop until the morning stillness was shattered as by the salute of an army corps.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DEATH OF COCKEYE.

FOR a long time nothing happened. Pale puffs of smoke drifted away on the morning breeze. Then a man in a red flannel undershirt, corduroy pants and buckskin mining boots appeared at the side of the shack with one hand shading his eyes from the glare of the sun.

His appearance was greeted by another volley. The man dropped and disappeared.

"Did you get him?" Patricia gasped, her eye glued to the orifice in the bowlder.

"Keep down and keep quiet," Pa snapped. "Who in heck is that feller? It ain't Slim and it ain't Cowhorn Lenkmarble. Must be some prospector or cowpuncher what's dropped in fer a visit. Who is that guy in the red undershirt, Loupo?"

"That's Spike McGee," Loupo answered. "He's corral boss now over t' th' X-Arrow-Z, and a real bad hombre."

Another man appeared, shading his eyes against the rising sun. He was tall and lean, and his hair was a flaming red.

"That's Snacker!"

Pa's pistol blazed as he said the words. Other pistols were blazing.

Snacker likewise dropped to hands and knees and vanished.

Presently a head peeked out from the other end of the shack. Then another head, and finally a third. There was the glint of steel, a sudden spark of red, a crash.

"Did ya hear that one go over yore head, gal? Keep down. Snacker's a deadly shot!"

A fourth head was added to the cluster at the end of the shack, then a fifth. Pa's forces blazed away at them. The morning air was beginning to smell strongly of gunpowder smoke.

Suddenly the five men broke from the end of the shack and sprinted. Each selected a rock and dropped down behind it.

"I don't like th' way we're missin' 'em," Pa growled. "We don't seem t' have th' range."

Out of the corner of her eye Patricia saw Loupo crawling forward on his stomach. His progress was snake-like. He slithered and wormed his way along the ground, his pistol sliding along before him. Suddenly he leaped for and gained the bowlder that had been his objective. He lifted his head, fired, and ducked.

"Pa," Cockeye shouted above the bedlam of battle, "I'm a-goin' to circle around up thar on that hill and attack 'em from th' rear. It's th' only chanst!"

"Go on, boy, and God bless ya!" Pa shouted. "Things ain't goin' right. What in Sam Hill's th' matter with you boys' shootin' this morning'?"

"They got behind them rocks too nimble, Pa. Well, so long, I'm a goin'. And I'm a-going' t' do th' elk-an'-bush trick. Mebbe Miss Patricia'd like t' see how we westerners pull off that famous trick."

"Did ya remember t' bring th' head along?"

"Shore! I parked it behind a rock aback yonder."

"Good boy! Go to it!"

Cockeye backed away from his bowlder and sought cover behind another. Patricia Watched him go. Finally he leaped to his feet and ran. His going was a signal for a burst of fire from Snacker's force, but he sped on, nimble as a deer.

Patricia watched the hilltop with fearful, fascinated eyes. Minutes passed. She waited, it seemed to her, hours. The smoke was lifting up in a bluish-gray pall all about her, and her nostrils smarted with the acid of it. Her heart was thumping wildly, and every nerve was tense.

"Look yonder, close by that big cottonwood," Pa instructed her.

"I don't see anything," she gasped. "Nothing but a clump of mesquite or some kind of bush."

"Jest watch that bush, gal. Oh, this elk-an'-bush trick is a humdinger, gal! We learned it back in th' old days f'm th' Indians. See it move?"

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Patricia stared at the distant bush. Her eyes grew tired. She closed them, and when she looked again the bush was no longer where it had been. It had descended the hillside perhaps a dozen feet or more, and above the bush the antlers of an elk were raised—an elk with an innocent, curious face turned toward the roar of battle.

Pa fired at the enemy's line as rapidly as he could load and pull the trigger.

"Part o' the elk-an'-bush trick," he explained, "is t' keep th' enemy's mind off o' whut's goin' on behind 'em."

By spurts of ten or twelve feet at a time the green bush and the elk's head moved down the hillside. Patricia watched it descend with dread. Slowly it came down, its pale pink blossoms twinkling in the sun, the eyes of the elk staring out with innocence and curiosity.

Suddenly there was a sharp crackling from the enemy's line. Snacker's gang had discovered the inquisitive elk!

The bush wavered. Suddenly it commenced to shiver and shake.

"They've hit him!" Patricia wailed.

"See how it's a-tremblin' and a-quiverin'? When it begins shakin' that way, it means that th' trick ain't worked."

First the elk's head fell, started rolling, gained in speed and went bounding down the hillside. Then the bush followed. The stout figure of Cockeye was revealed. He seemed to be wavering. Then the sun glinted on the pistol in his hand as he raised it.

There was another sharp crackling of pistols in the hands of Snacker's gang.

Cockeye fired once. Then the pistol slipped from his hand. He threw up his arms wildly and pitched forward on his face, rolling over and over and over in a cloud of dust until he reached a little level place where he stopped rolling and lay face down, the morning breeze gently stirring a tuft of hair on the back of his head.

"Why! They killed him!" Patricia cried.

"They got him," Pa grunted. "Too bad. One o' the best shots we had, too. Well, war ain't purty, gal. Thar! I think I got that one, th' low-down scoundrel!"

"Which one?"

"Th' one behind that second rock. Shucks! Nope. See his head just pop up? Thar, damn ya!" And Pa's pistol spoke again, nearly shattering Patricia's eardrum.

"Nope! He ducked again!"

The figure behind the rock that Pa had been shooting at rose once more. This time he exposed not only his head, but his shoulders. A mocking laugh rang over the hillside. It was the man in the red flannel undershirt.

"Shoot him!" she cried. "Oh, shoot him!"

Pa's pistol blazed. Others blazed simultaneously. The laughter of the man in the red undershirt was suddenly stilled. He staggered out from behind the rock.

Pa shot at him three times as fast as hammer would rise and fall.

"Thar!" he snarled.

The man in the red flannel undershirt was staggering. At Pa's third shot he leaped into the air. His eyes rolled wildly. His arms swung loosely about him.

Pa stood up recklessly and emptied his pistol at him. The man continued to stagger. He was still staggering aimlessly about among the bowlders when Pa finished reloading.

"I'm gettin' old," Pa growled. "I can't hit nothin' no more."

"Shoot him!" Patricia entreated. "Oh, please put the poor thing out of his misery!"

Pa blazed away. Four times he shot—from the hip. With his remaining bullets he took greater pains. He raised the pistol above his head and slowly brought it down. He fired once.

And suddenly the man in the red undershirt collapsed as he staggered forward, and lay in a crumpled heap, only the tips of his fingers which were stretched out before him quivering.

"He's dying!" Patricia screamed.

Pa shot again.

"That 'll finish him!"

Loupo the Wolf was leaving his bowlder, progressing in the same snakelike manner as before, his chin to the ground, his heels kicking out grotesquely behind him.

"Watch that boy!" Pa cried. "He shore is a wonder at that trick!"

Loupo safely gained his objective, an-

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other bowlder. He raised his head for a sight and suddenly dropped it. Then he lifted his pistol, leaped up, fired and dropped back.

"This yere fight's a goin' t' last longer th'n we expected," Pa said anxiously. "With pore Cockeye gone we're handicapped bad. Look yonder! Thar's a sight, gal, ya'll rarely see two of in a lifetime!"

Snacker had left his bowlder. He was leaping about with hands on hips, executing the strangest dance Patricia had ever seen. His long red hair tossed about in the air like a leaping flame. He sprang up, twisted about and, when he came down, sprang out in another direction.

It reminded Patricia somewhat of the dances she had seen girls do in filmy draperies on lawns. But there was an abandon in this dance that those esthetic dancers had lacked.

"What is he doing?" she demanded.

"It's an old dance that Snacker learnt f'm th' Indians. It's known as th' Dance t' th' Bullet God, gal. And ain't it a dandy? Ya see, no one has a chance t' hit Snacker when he's a cavortin' around thataway. It may look strange t' ya, but it's a sign that I don't like at all. It means that he's gettin' a line on us—sizin' us up, findin' out where we are a hidin'. Thar! He's done now!"

At that moment Snacker disappeared behind his bowlder. The Dance to the Bullet God was over, and other developments were taking its place.

Jack the Jumper was creeping out from behind his rock, but there was not in his movements the reptilian grace that had characterized Loupo the Wolf's advance. He was going forward on hands and knees, with his pistol clamped in his teeth.

"Jack's a goin' t' git somebody!" Pa cried. "He don't never act thataway onless he's up t' trouble. Watch him, gal. Jack in action is a sight fer sore eyes!"

Patricia watched him with fascination. She gleaned that the enemy was watching him, too. They were blazing away at him every time his lean body was exposed. Then she saw that a man from the other side was duplicating Jack the Jumper's movements.

Every time Jack crept a foot forward, a man with hair so blond that it was almost a silver white crept forward a foot also. His pistol was likewise clamped in his teeth.

"This is goin' to be turrible!" Pa muttered. "That feller out yonder is Slim Wheemer, next t' One-Shot Snacker, th' deadliest shot in th' outfit. Watch 'em close, gal. Something will happen any minnit. Look thar!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

DEATH OF SLIM WHEEMER.

JACK THE JUMPER had jumped. At the instant of his jumping Slim Wheemer had whipped his gun from his mouth and fired. But Jack had jumped the fraction of a second sooner! Now he jumped again—only in time to save himself from the deadly aim of the tall, lean blond man.

"Is that why they call him Jack the Jumper?" Patricia gasped.

"Ya've guessed it, gal. It's a trick Jack learned hisself back in th' Indian days. He learnt it fust on bow-and-arrer attacks, and later on he puffected hisself to leap aside when a man drew a bead on him. He studied grasshoppers fer months, they say, learnin' hisself to jump thataway.

"Did ye ever notice how a grasshopper always jumps jest as ya're about t' put yore hand on him? Well, that's the principle Jack th' Jumper learned."

Jack was now jumping about nimbly. He always landed in a jumping attitude, on hands, knees, and tiptoes; and not once did the pistol leave his mouth. Each time Slim Wheemer aimed at him and fired, Jack the Jumper was in mid-air, just coming down.

"Ya see," Pa explained excitedly, "how cute he's got t'time hisself, gal? He mustn't be goin' up when th' shot is fired. He must be jest comin' down, or else th' bullet 'd catch him unprepared and in mid-air. I used t' be purty good at that trick myself till I got all cramped and stiffened up with age. Age is a turrible thing, gal. Blam! Did ya see that?"

Jack had jumped completely over a large bowlder. For a moment he was obscured

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from sight, but presently he flew gracefully into the air again.

"Ya see the puzzled look a spreadin' on Slim Wheemer's face?" Pa cried. "Jack's got him guessin' now. Oh, it's a dandy trick! Onless I miss my guess, ya'll see somethin' interestin' in a minnit now. That jumpin' always gits 'em. I've seen Jack jump around fer a full two hours thataway before he done got his man, but he got him in th' end. Ya see whut's happenin', gal?"

"Why, that blond man seems terribly uncertain and perplexed," Patricia gasped.

"That's jest whut Jack's a workin' on, gal. He's gittin' his victim turrible oncertain and perplexed. Now watch him. Ya see his shoulders a beginnin' to wiggle? See that? Now his legs is beginnin' t' twitch!"

"What's he going to do, Pa?"

"Why, the pore fish is a goin' t' try to do th' same thing Jack's a doin'! That's Jack's game. He gits th' other feller so nervous and befuddled by all that jumpin' that th' other feller jest has t' try it once fer hisself. And he only does it once, gal, 'cause he ain't spent the years of patient study puffectin' his art that Jack's done spent. He cain't time his jump right t' save hisself. Thar he goes!" Pa shrilled.

The cunning strategy of Jack the Jumper had succeeded. The slim blond fellow had suddenly leaped. Up and up he went, and by the time he started down, Jack the Jumper was on his knees firing with deadly aim. When Slim Wheemer dropped he did not rise again, but lay as he had fallen, face turned to the blue morning sky, eyes closed, hands outstretched on either side of him, his silvery blond hair stirring slightly in the morning breeze.

"Dead?" Patricia gasped.

"When Jack shoots 'em in mid-air thataway," Pa replied grimly, "they're dead men while they're still a yard off the ground. Well! Whut in Sam Hill's a happenin'? See if I c'n plug that low-down scoundrel now!"

Pa's pistol blazed, but his target, an amazingly thin man with a strange looking head, leaped into the air and alighted safely on all fours.

"Well, whut in Sam Hill!" Pa gasped.

Patricia was staring at the man who had leaped to safety in a manner so closely akin to that of Jack the Jumper's. His head had been shaved or clipped recently, and only a dark, fuzzy layer surmounted it. But the part of him that was so strange was his ears. They were ivory in color and protruded straight out from the sides of his head, strangely resembling the ears of a dog that has just heard the voice of its master.

"That's Cowhorn Lenkmarble, so-called," Pa explained, "on account o' th' curious formation of his ears. Now whut d'ya suppose that scoundrel is up to?"

It was soon evident from Cowhorn Lenkmarble's tactics that Jack the Jumper was not to retire too easily with his recently won laurels.

Pa seized Patricia's arm in a viselike grip.

"Gal, somethin' turrible and onexpected has happened. Cowhorn Lenkmarble is a jumper hisself. Prob'ly fer the fust time in history two jumpers are fightin' in th' same battle on opposite sides. Oh, but this is goin' t' be a dool wuth watchin'! It's goin' t' be th' dool of a century!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

DEATH OF THE JUMPER.

"BUT why don't you shoot at him, now you've got the chance?" Patricia demanded,

"Why, gal, I'm surprised at ya fer askin' that question!" Pa exclaimed. "It wouldn't be a sportin' thing t' do."

"But this is war."

"Mebbe so, honey, but it ain't th' kind o' war they fought with th' Germans. Out yere we fight our wars our own way. When two men like them starts a dool, we jest nachally take time out. Gal! Did ya see *that?* Oh, this is shore a goin' t' be *good!*"

Patricia had seen. She had been watching Jack the Jumper. Jack, on hands, knees, and tiptoes, was straining for a leap; but the other man had leaped first—a clean, graceful flight into the air. He settled down as airily as a butterfly.

"He's jest showin' Jack his form," Pa

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explained. "Now, watch Jack show some o' hisn."

The words had hardly left his mouth before Jack was in mid-air, sailing lightly aloft and as lightly down while the air was filled with cheers.

"Looks to me like our Jack's the better jumper," Pa said judicially, "but ya c'n never tell. Cowhorn Lenkmarble made th' purtier landin', and he's younger. Jack ain't as spry as he used t' be. He's gettin' along, Jack is, and—yowee! Yipee!"

Cowhorn Lenkmarble did seem indeed the nimbler of the two jumpers. He was leaping in long, easy flights from spot to spot, seeming hardly to touch the ground. Forty feet from where he had started he alighted and clung on the top of a rock, his grotesque ears seeming to move in the breeze.

"Show him yore stuff, Jack!" Pa shouted.

But Jack was in the air before Pa spoke. He was leaping as Cowhorn Lenkmarble had leaped, but there was something in his technique that the younger jumper had seemed to lack. His jumping was more hazardous. For one thing, he cleared larger bowlders; and he jumped with more precision than the other. Also, he took longer and more graceful flights.

"I reckon the solo work is over," Pa muttered. "Now fer the real stuff. Oh, but this is goin' to be wuth *while*, gal! Didn't I tell ya ya'd see some amazin' things? Don't miss a trick, gal, 'cause yo're likely never t' see another typical Western fight as long as ya live. This yere dool o' th' jumpers is only one of 'em.

"Ya notice how bowlegged both of 'em is, gal? Bowleggedness is part o' th' muscular development of a jumper. Twice the spring in a pair o' bowlegs th'n in a pair o' straight ones."

The jumpers now settled down to their work in earnest. Each having tested the other's steel, so to speak, they were ready for shooting. In and out among the rocks they leaped, sometimes near and sometimes far apart. The distance they could cover in a short space of time was, to Patricia, almost unbelievable.

She was sure that less than one minute had elapsed from the time they started leaping until they were two dancing dark specks away down the hillside, springing in and out among the bowlders. She waited tensely for the first shot.

"It's settlin' down into a endurance contest," Pa grunted, "but the fust shot, gal, may likely be th' last. Yere they come back! Jest look at 'em come!"

The jumpers were returning with incredible rapidity toward the firing line. Occasionally the sun caught a glint from the pistol in the mouth of one or the other; occasionally one of them vanished for a moment behind a rock, but he would immediately reappear, jumping as if he would never tire.

It was a fascinating duel to watch. First Jack the Jumper would be in the air, then Cowhorn Lenkmarble. Never were the two in the air simultaneously.

"Once th' two o' them git into th' air at the same time," Pa informed her, "th' chances are th' dool is over, fer all jumpers train theirselves to shoot from aloft with deadly accuracy."

The end came before Patricia had even begun to tire of watching the graceful antics of the two. They came leaping toward the spot from whence they had started, Cowhorn Lenkmarble on his side of the lines, and Jack the Jumper on his. They came so close that Patricia was afraid for a moment that Jack would jump upon the bowlder behind which she was concealing herself from the enemy's fire.

She watched him with sudden concern. He was tiring. His face was shining with perspiration, his breath was coming and going in frantic puffs, and there was a glitter as of desperation in his bulging eyes. His jumps had lost their former spring, and he no longer leaped so high into the air.

And suddenly it happened. Each of the jumpers left the bowlder on which he had alighted at the same moment. They sprang into the air with a simultaneous motion of arms and legs. Each whipped the gun from his mouth with the same swift gesture; and the two explosions were as one.

In mid-air both jumpers appeared to crumple. They fell perhaps twenty feet apart, in identical lifeless heaps, their faces

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in the sand, their hands outstretched, their legs quivering slightly.

Jack the Jumper flopped about, however, long after his enemy became still, bounding and flopping as the carcass of poultry will when the head has suddenly been severed. Presently he only jerked, as spasm after spasm went through him.

"His jumpin' muscles are workin' t' th' very end," Pa explained.

Jack abruptly became still. A quiver passed through his frame, and it relaxed.

"Both dead!" Patricia cried.

"Gal," Pa said dolefully, "I'm beginnin' t' think that th' luck ain't on our side today. Cockeye gone, and now Jack gone. Of coss, we've nicked two o' theirn, but we should 'a' made a lot better progress than we have. It must be nigh onto seven-thutty." He raised his voice. "Loupo," he shouted, "go git Snacker. The tide's a goin' ag'in' us, and we ain't got no time t' lose."

"How'll I git him?" the Wolf called back.

"Challenge him to a snake dool!" Pa shrilled.

"*I'll* snake him fer ya!" the sneering voice of One-Shot Snacker floated over to them from the enemy's line.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

DEATH OF LOUPO.

"ALL this Western stuff we're a pullin' in this yere battle," Pa said to Patricia, "oughta be plumb interestin' to an Eastern gal. I reckon ya never heard tell of a snake dool, have ya?"

"Never!" Patricia gasped.

"It's beginnin' now," Pa warned her. "Watch. Thar'll be time out ag'in."

Patricia watched Loupo with tense interest. He was commencing to glide forward through the sand again, his body seeming to ripple like that of a snake's, his feet kicking slightly, the pistol in his hand, raised. She noticed that that pistol was always raised, always ready.

A bright red spot materialized amongst the rocks towards which Loupo's vermiculations were carrying him.

"Snacker!" she gasped.

"Watch 'em!" Pa counseled.

She watched. The red head of Snacker appeared, disappeared, then reappeared, each time a little closer; and Loupo the Wolf continued on his snake-like way, inching along with pistol pressed forward, sombrero pushed back, toes wriggling.

"Ya'll notice he never wags his laigs in th' air," Pa pointed out to her. "T' do so is reel dangerous. The idea in a snake dool is t' keep yore body flattened as flat t' th' ground as possible. Jest see that boy slip over th' ground!

"He learnt it from his pappy, who was an old Indian fighter. I've seen his pappy slip through grass skassly a foot high; ya couldn't see hide nor hair of him; his goin' was jest like a quick ripple seen along th' top o' th' grass. Look at that, gal!"

The blazing red poll of Snacker had bobbed up and down again with lightning-like rapidity. Sunlight gleamed momentarily on the barrel of his pistol; then he was gone again.

Closer and closer together the two men drew. Now they were hardly two bowlders apart. Where the duellists were converging the ground dipped to form a shallow saucer, in the center of which was a bowlder about three feet square. From the slight elevation of the land on which Patricia's and Pa's bowlder was situated they commanded the scene ideally.

They saw Snacker and Loupo worm and wriggle toward the bowlder in a simultaneous spurt. Both men gained the shelter of the bowlder at the same instant, it seemed to Patricia, although Pa said, with the authority of an expert, that Snacker was there a second and a half sooner.

The duellists were now head to head, so to speak. Only the bowlder was between them. Snacker's legs pointed almost due north; Loupo's almost due south.

"Now fer th' fun!" Pa croaked.

But for what seemed an eternity to the watching girl, neither of the men moved. Then she saw Loupo's head waving from left to right, slowly at first, then more and more rapidly and in wider arcs, until it was vibrating like a large inverted pendulum, so swiftly that her eyes could hardly follow it.

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"Is Snacker doing the same?" she asked.

"Jest the same, gal. It's the critical part o' th' snake trick. Whichever catches th' other full face on and shoots jest at that moment wins. Ya c'n see how difficult it is. Loupo's head must be vibratin' back and forth now several hondred times per minute. In fact, it's a-movin' so fast ya'd skassly know he had a head at all, would ya?"

"I can see nothing now but his shoulders," Patricia agreed. "Above them there is only a blur."

"Watch close, gal, fer Snacker's a-vibratin' his head jest the same way and jest as fast."

And suddenly there was a streak of flame, an explosion.

Loupo's head stopped in mid-vibration. Slowly it sank down upon his chest.

"Good Gawd!" Pa groaned. "Snacker got him! He winged him th' fust shot!"

"Did he kill him?"

"Jest look at th' pore feller, gal."

Patricia stared with horror and pity. Loupo's head sank lower and lower until his chin rested on his chest. Then he rolled over with a fantastic looseness as if his bones had turned to jelly.

"I'm going out to him," Patricia said firmly.

"What fur, gal?" Pa gasped.

"To comfort him! To let him know the softness of a woman's arms before—before he goes!"

Pa laid a restraining hand on her arm.

"No, gal, ya ain't," he said gruffly. "Th' men o' th' West don't die that way. It's a ruthless country, honey, where men fight hard and die game. Let him die by hisself."

Loupo's eyes stared glassily at the sky. His hands lay outstretched beside him. His legs quivered a little, then were still.

"Dead!" Patricia cried. "He's dead!"

Pa Jarvis nodded his long white beard. "Th' situation's gettin' reel oncomfortable, honey. They're a-shootin' straighter and better th'n we are. D'ya reelize, gal, how many of us they is left—and their crack shot ain't been tetched yet? Jest me an' Nettie an' Hennery and Ham Abney. Well, I reckon it's my turn now."

"Pa," she cried, "now's your chance!" She pointed an excited finger at the tall, lean figure that was striding away from the corpse of Loupo with such unconcern.

"Shoot him! Shoot Snacker!"

"Gal, I cain't. It wouldn't be a sportin' thing t' do."

"But what shall we do, Pa? We're being licked! We haven't a chance with Loupo and Jack and Cockeye all gone! Is Hamilton Abney a good fighter?"

"He's good in a pinch, gal. Ham never has much t' say till a fight's almost over, then he comes t' life, and when Ham Abney comes t' life a cageful of fightin' wildcats is like two leetle kittens playin' with a spool o' thread by comparison. Well, I'm goin' now, gal."

"Oh, Pa, don't go. Don't leave me here all alone!"

"Duty's a-callin' me, honey. It's my turn. And I'm a goin' t' meet my fate like th' red-blooded man I am."

"Won't you forgive me before you go for all the cruel, despicable things I've said?"

He laid his gnarled old hand gently on her shining chestnut hair.

"O' coss I fergive ya, gal! They ain't nothin' t' fergive. Ya jest didn't onderstand th' ways o' the West, that's all. All that's done past and fergot now, honey. Well, I'm a-goin'. Old Pa Jarvis may be a-goin' t' his everlastin' reward, but they cain't never say he was a quitter!"

Firing had been resumed. Ham Abney, behind his bowlder, was sniping at heads when they revealed themselves. A brisk popping was under way in Nettie's and Henry's direction.

Patricia felt suddenly weak and weary.

"Old man Gimish!" Pa shrilled.

And a clear shrill from the enemy's line answered him: "I hear ya!"

"I challenge ya to a dool, Mr. Gimish! It's Mr. Jarvis a-speakin' t' ya!"

"I'll take th' challenge!" the shrill answer floated back. "Whut kinda dool air ya hankerin' fer?"

"A runnin' dool!" Pa bellowed.

"All right. A runnin' dool it be!" was the thin old piping reply.

"What is a running duel?" Patricia gasped.

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"In a runnin' dool," Pa explained as he looked at his weapon, "th' doolers is compelled t' stand erect throughout, but they mustn't not fer a split second stand still even while they're loadin'. Now jest watch me run that old fool to death!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

DEATH OF PA JARVIS.

IN the confusion of Pa's sudden departure from the rock Patricia was momentarily dazed by the appearance of a man from the enemy's line, equally as old as Pa, if not older. Like Pa Jarvis, he had permitted his snowy white beard and his hair to grow. And Patricia was conscious of a sudden sense of revulsion.

Hitherto the fight had horrified her and thrilled her by turns, but the sight of these two grandfathers sprinting across the landscape, as they presently were, was sickening. It was shameful.

Such elderly men should not be permitted to indulge in warfare, let alone duels so gruelling as this running duel between Pa Jarvis and old man Gimish presently steadied down to be.

It was at once apparent that the running type of duel would consume vast quantities of ammunition. Pa began firing the instant he sprang out from the bowlder; and old man Gimish was not a second behind him.

The direction of their flight was almost identical with that of Jack the Jumper and Cowhorn Lenkmarble, save that it took them much farther away. They almost vanished into the valley, following a course parallel with two imaginary lines laid outward from the firing lines, firing in bursts of six shots as they went, and reloading with amazing rapidity. First, Patricia would see six spurts of flame from the pistol in each of the old gentlemen's hands, then there would be a lull while the contestants raced and reloaded, then six more shots would follow.

Apparently neither of the men were inflicting any considerable damage, for neither had once faltered, although it was impossible for Patricia to see what went on in the valley. Presently they came sprinting back, firing as they came. Both lines cheered as they came.

They raced past the bowlder behind which Patricia crouched, breathlessly watching the procedure; they raced up the hillside, and gradually, as she watched them, Pa Jarvis gained. Old man Gimish dropped back, to reload Patricia imagined, then spurted on.

Pa Jarvis turned about and emptied all six chambers at the man laboring up the hillside behind him, then turned and ran. The fight was now leaning heavily in old man Gimish's favor. He had not yet discharged his pistol in answer to Pa's volley, and Pa, handicapped by the stiff grade ahead of him, would have some difficulty in reloading his.

Evidently he despaired of accomplishing this, for his speed was suddenly accelerated and he dashed on up the hill, his beard waving out behind him in the breeze, old man Gimish close behind him, aiming carefully but never firing.

The two old gentlemen vanished one after the other over the hilltop, and Patricia held her breath for what seemed hours. Then they reappeared, weaving in and out among the cottonwoods; and Pa Jarvis was still in the lead.

He took the hill in great strides, and made with business-like vigor for the toolhouse on the hillside near the stamp-mill. Its blackness presently engulfed him.

Old man Gimish darted into the black hole after him. For a time there was silence, disturbed only by the frantic hammering of her heart. Then shots rang out from the depths of the shack.

Presently a man dashed out into the sunlight. It was old man Gimish in retreat. He loped down the hillside, and close upon his heels was Pa Jarvis, stuffing cartridges into his pistol as he came.

Once again the race carried the two past the bowlder behind which Patricia was shielding herself; once again it threatened to be continued almost out of sight down into the valley; but the duellists, with one accord, turned back, firing and reloading as they came.

The duel ended a dozen feet away from Patricia's bowlder. When they were abreast of it the two old men discharged a broad-

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side. And when Patricia peeped over the edge she saw Pa Jarvis staggering. One hand was clutched to his throat.

He reeled this way and that, and as he staggered the expression on the countenance of his enemy softened. Into old man Gimish's bearded old face came the look of one who could not bear to see a fellow man suffer.

Raising his pistol he fired—once! And as the echoes of the shot died away Pa sank to the sand. He stretched out on his back, his shock of white hair stirring gently in the breeze. His fingers twitched once, a long sigh quivered from that old gnarled frame—and he was still!

"Oh—oh, Lord!" Patricia groaned, and buried her face in her hands.

There was silence on the battlefield for some time. She raised her face, streaming with tears, as some one touched her timidly on the arm, and she looked up, startled, into the pale, meek eyes of Hamilton Clay Abney.

The sun glistened pinkly on his baldness. Gazing at him, Patricia could not believe that Pa Jarvis had spoken the truth. This inoffensive creature compared to wildcats—compared even to one wildcat! It was absurd.

Then she looked more deeply into the lawyer's pale eyes and was startled at what she saw there. It was as if a yellow coal were glowing balefully in each eyeball, a coal that threatened violence and heralded destruction!

"Ma'am," the attorney addressed her in his shy, somehow shrinking manner, "I reckon it's up t' me t' save th' day. Ya may think t' look at me th't I'm a mild, inoffensive man. But when I git started, ma'am, I'm a killer. I'm a holy terror. I c'n feel a killin' spell a-creepin' over me now.

"Ya see, ma'am, I c'n control these spells at will. I c'n feel it a-comin' on. Oh, it's a-comin'! Ya cain't drive a nail with a sponge, ma'am, and I'm a-turnin' t' cement under yore very eyes! It's a-comin'!"

Patricia stared at him with fascination and sudden horror. His face had abruptly changed from the pasty face of the harmless man she knew to a mask of living death. A spasm passed over it. The lips were skinned back horridly from the teeth. The large pale nose wrinkled shockingly. The eyebrows quivered and furred up. The eyes burned and glimmered. The eyelids twitched.

And suddenly Wildcat Abney sprang to his feet.

"I'm a-comin'!" he shrieked. "Look out fer yoreselves *now!* Wildcat Abney's on his way! I'm a-comin'!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

DEATH OF MR. ABNEY.

THERE was a gleaming blue automatic pistol in each of the fighting lawyer's hands, and they began spurting flame and hoarsely barking the instant he left the shelter of the bowlder. Jeers and a volley of shots from the enemy's line greeted his appearance. These shots evidently all went wild, for Wildcat Abney was not deflected from his purpose.

He leaped from rock to rock, not with the agility and grace of the two jumpers, but with a frenzy quite as fine, his manner of attack taking on indeed a marked semblance to that of the ferocious little animal after which he had been named.

From the shy and retiring proprietor of the Last Chance saloon, from the meek and bewildered attorney, Hamilton Clay Abney had undergone a miraculous metamorphosis, had emerged from his cocoon and borrowed so liberally from the personality of the wild cat that Patricia watched him with mounting awe and hope.

Here, indeed, was a fighter who would save the remnants of Pa Jarvis's faithful little band if it was humanly possible. His methods were simple and direct. He bristled fury and hate. His charge on the enemy's stronghold was an awe-inspiring thing.

Inhuman sounds issued from his lips as he advanced, and the pistols spat out their messengers of death. The lust to kill was in the very arrangement of his thin, graying hair.

Snacker and old man Gimish peeked out now and then and fired at him, but none of these shots took effect, for which Patricia

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praised Heaven. If he could only wipe them out! He reached nearly to the enemy's bowlders, but at the crucial moment, with victory all but in his grasp, his triggers clicked on empty firing chambers; and in panic haste he came charging back to Patricia's bowlder to reload.

Sweat was streaming from his face; and under the pressure of excitement, or the ordeal that he was going through, his eyes had become slightly crossed. This optical waywardness lent him an added look of meanness. He bared his yellow teeth in a ferocious grin.

"I'll get 'em this time!" he shouted. "Jest watch me, ma'am. The way I'm a-carryin' out this attack is th' way it should 'a' been carried out in th' fust place. These jumpin' dools and these snake dools and these so-called runnin' dools ain't got no place in modern warfare. They're jest child's play. And look whut it's done fer us!

"But have no fear, ma'am. The cleanin' up time is yere. All I crave is fer ya to watch me wipe 'em out. Yowee! I'm a comin'! Wildcat Abney is on th' way! Prepare t' meet yore God! I'm a warnin' ya! Yere I come!"

He sprang from the bowlder and raced toward the opposite side of No Man's Land. Suddenly he leaped into the air and fell sprawling. Nimbly he picked himself up and turned apologetically.

"'Tweren't nothin', ma'am. Jest stubbed my toe."

"Go and get 'em!" Patricia shrilled.

On the wild cat went. Snacker and old man Gimish this time met his attack with cool indifference. Each stood up behind his rock and desultorily blazed away, emptying one weapon after another.

But Hamilton Abney escaped unscathed. Into the very mouths of the enemy's guns he advanced, firing in bursts; but there were no casualties. And for the third time the wild cat retreated to the shelter of Patricia's bowlder.

Sweat was streaming from him. Foam flecked his lips.

"Don't give up hope, ma'am," he gasped. "Each and every time I go I git madder and madder. This is th' time I git 'em. Whut ya've seen up to now has been jest child's play. My rage is worked up now t' th' killin' point. It's b'ilin' now."

He finished reloading. "Now fer th' wipin' up, ma'am. In thutty seconds more th' fight 'll be won. Yowee! I'm a comin'! And I ain't a goin' t' give no quarter! Yipee! Yere I come!"

Out from the rock he sprang. Old man Gimish emptied his pistol at him, and Hamilton Clay Abney fired briskly in return. Suddenly the white-haired old man wavered. His head sagged down on his breast.

"He got me!" he gasped. "I'm done fer!" He fell back, sagging into the arms of Snacker.

Wildcat Abney came trotting back to Patricia's stronghold. He threw himself down on the sand beside her, panting.

"I got him!" he gasped. "Jest lemme rest up a minnit, and I'll go back and git Snacker th' same way. Oh, it's th' only way t' fight, gal—keep a goin' and a goin' until ya git every last man of 'em. I'll git Snacker next."

A harsh, chilling voice floated over No Man's Land.

"Wildcat Abney?" it rasped.

"Snacker?" Patricia demanded.

"Yes, gal, that's him. Whut ya want, Snacker?"

"I want t' challenge ya to a dool!"

"Whut kinda dool?"

"S'pense dool."

"Light ain't dark enough, Snacker!"

"Dark enough fer me, Abney. Scairt of a leetle sunlight?"

"No, b' Gawd! I'll fight ya a s'pense dool. Knives barred. Nothin' but six-guns. No fair kickin', bitin', hittin', or scratchin. Pick out yore range and say when!"

"That patch o' sand yonder between them two bowlders."

"Suits me!" Ham Abney lowered his voice. "Th' s'pense dool, ma'am, was invented by one o' Custer's men, they say."

"Why do they call it the suspense duel?" Patricia gasped.

"Th' idee," Ham explained hastily, as he looked to his weapons, "is t' bluff th'

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other feller into not pluggin' ya fust. Th' feller with th' strongest will power wins. Watch close, 'cause they's mighty leetle t' be seen by th' naked eye."

"Ready?" called Snacker.

"Ready!" shouted Abney.

"Go!"

Wildcat Abney scrambled out from the rock. He made for a patch of white soft floury sand about fifty feet in length by twenty wide.

At either end of the short patch a large bowlder stood. He took his stand before the nearest of the two bowlders, and Patricia breathlessly watched One-Shot Snacker as he leisurely walked to the other bowlder and stopped. He was grinning contemptuously.

"Guns!" snapped Abney.

Four pistols instantly appeared—one in each hand of each contestant.

And slowly one approached the other. They moved so slowly that it was all but impossible for Patricia to estimate the distance covered in a full minute. They did not creep. They inched. With guns at the hip position, the duellists warily approached. Hours seemed to pass.

It was, indeed, a suspense duel. At any instant one, two, three or all four guns might be discharged.

The strain was telling on both men. Patricia could see only the back of Ham Abney's head; but his neck was streaming, glistening, with perspiration. As for One-Shot Snacker, his sharp blue eyes were commencing to bulge with the strain. Not for one instant did he remove them from the eyes of his antagonist.

Slowly, oh, so slowly, they approached! The pistols in Abney's hands were trembling now. The red-haired giant was wearing him down!

Patricia's mouth was parched. Her heart thumped wildly in her breast. She wanted to cry out encouragement to Ham Abney, but she could not speak. She could hardly breathe. Beads of icy perspiration stood out on her white forehead; they broke into little streams and cascaded down her cheeks.

Snacker had skinned back his lips from his yellowed fangs. His jaw muscles bulged. His breath came and went in sharp gasps.

But of the two men, Ham Abney was suffering the most. The trembling of his hands had extended to his arms. Now his entire frame underwent a convulsion. His teeth were chattering. He advanced another quarter of an inch.

The two men were now scarcely a foot apart.

And suddenly Ham Abney uttered a hoarse cry—his will had succumbed to the other's! Now he was trembling so that the pistols in his hands waved loosely from side to side. He had lost all control. Patricia could see that he was trying to press the triggers; but he could not. His knees knocked feebly together.

At these symptoms of the utter collapse of his opponent's stamina, a change came over the red-haired man. His expression relaxed. His eyes returned to their sockets. His smile returned.

Deliberately, calmly, he raised both pistols—fired!

Ham Abney stopped trembling. He staggered. One hand was clutched over his heart. He turned to Patricia, and she saw that his eyes were rolling. He staggered a step toward her. He reeled. He spun crazily about.

He emitted a hoarse cry. It was the death cry. He flung up his arms and fell crashing to the earth, his eyes staring up glassily at the sky. One leg twitched, then a hand. Then he was still.

Patricia screamed.

CHAPTER XL.

DEATH OF NETTIE AND HENRY.

"C'M on, Hennery! We'll git him!" With panic-stricken eyes Patricia turned. She had, until Nettie's voice rang out, forgotten the existence of these others. But hope expired even as it was born. Nettie and Henry were no match for that sharpshooter.

"Nettie," she cried, "we'll rush him together!" She reached for the pistol in her holster, and a sudden faintness overcame her. The holster was empty! Somewhere

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along the trail from Horseblanket, or when she had crawled here from the gulley, she had lost the pistol.

"Spread out!" Nettie shouted.

Dazedly Patricia saw her brother go scuttling off through the bowlders to the left, while Nettie wormed her way among rocks and corpses straight for Snacker's hiding place.

Patricia darted to the rock behind which Loupo had concealed himself before the battle had started. She suddenly recalled that, in his duel with Snacker, Loupo had not had the opportunity to discharge his pistol. She must obtain that pistol.

She slid out from the bowlder on her stomach and wormed her way forward. All was silent now on No Man's Land. What was Snacker doing? An icy chill sped through her. She slid forward another foot and listened. Suddenly a shot rang out.

She looked in time to see Henry dropping behind a rock, a puff of pale smoke drifting lazily in the air near by. She wriggled on.

The pistol was lying only a few inches from Loupo's nerveless fingers. She shuddered as she neared him. Never had she been so near a dead man.

Another wriggle and the pistol was almost within reach. She lunged, and her hand closed about the butt.

The mechanism of an automatic pistol was unfamiliar to her; but she presumed that Loupo, a few seconds before dying, had set it in the firing position.

She aimed generally in Snacker's direction and pulled the trigger. The explosion nearly deafened her, and the recoil all but jerked the pistol from her hand.

"I'll save the last shot for myself," she promised, and wriggled on over the sand.

Suddenly, from the tail of her eye, she saw Nettie and Henry spring up and start running, firing as they went. She held her breath for an instant of horrible uncertainty.

Then Nettie shouted: "The sage, Henry, the sage!"

There was, not far from the spot where Pa Jarvis had fallen, an area of sage, higher than a tall man's head. The sage patch was only about forty-five or fifty feet in circumference, but it afforded excellent cover. Henry and Nettie disappeared into it.

Then Snacker leaped from behind his bowlder and dashed for the sage patch also. The tops of the sage-bushes waved to and fro in his passage. Then there was a shot —and Snacker had once more lived up to his deadly reputation!

Henry came bursting from the sage patch. He stopped a dozen yards away from Patricia and staggered, his arms waving limply. Suddenly he threw up his arms and sank to the sand, his eyes turned glassily to the sky.

In horror Patricia listened for the shot that would spell either defeat or victory. Nettie against that fiend! Suddenly to her amazed ears came the trampling of a horse's hoofs. A white horse dashed out of the sage brush, and Nettie was clinging to its back. Another horse appeared—a black one—bearing the clinging figure of Snacker!

The man and the girl were to engage in that most thrilling of all Western duels—a horseback duel! Down into the valley the riders raced, each swung out over the horse's side, each shielding himself from pistol fire, each leaning out from time to time and shooting at the other from under the horse's head.

Down into the valley they raced, and back they came, each having changed position to the other side of the horse. So skillfully was Snacker clinging to his horse that Patricia could see nothing of him — not even a hand or a foot. The horse might have been riderless!

They came toward her at a full gallop, firing as they came. And suddenly Nettie's horse shied. The girl spun through the air, alighting on her feet in the soft sand, the horse galloping on—back into the area of sagebrush.

Nettie staggered.

Patricia caught a hand to her mouth to stifle a scream.

"Oh, the poor things!" she groaned. "That villain! That fiend! Shooting a woman!"

She watched Nettie with fascinated eyes.

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Nettie sank to hands and knees, her head hanging; she sagged lower and lower. She collapsed, twitched and lay still.

CHAPTER XLI.

ALONE WITH HER DEAD.

REGARDLESS of the danger to which she was exposing herself, Patricia leaped up, scrambled upon the nearest rock. Snacker had retired to his bowlder. A bright red spot lifted itself.

She aimed wildly and fired three times. The last shot she would save for herself! Death she preferred to her fate at Snacker's hands.

She sped over the ground toward Henry; kneeled down and took his head in her lap.

"Henry!" she groaned. "Oh, my God! They're dead! They're all dead!"

She looked about her despairingly. Near by lay the body of Nettie. Yonder in a shapeless heap lay Pa Jarvis. Beyond him lay Jack the Jumper. In the distance lay Loupo the Wolf.

All dead! All alive and eager to help her an hour before; now, mere stiffening husks! And she had accused them of not being men! She had jeered at their boast that here, in this great, raw West, all men were men; she had sneeringly remarked that this was the place where *some* men were men, but that she hadn't found one so far! How gamely, how heroically, how picturesquely each one in turn had laid down his life for her!

"Henry!" she wailed. "Henry, speak to me! Pa, you aren't dead! You—you can't all be dead! I'm just dreaming. I—I know I'll wake up in just a moment. Of course—I'm asleep. That's it!"

To convince herself, she pinched her arm. It hurt sharply.

Patricia dropped her face to her hands, and her slim shoulders quivered with sobs.

There was a crunching in the sand near by. She dropped her hands and looked up, then screamed. A tall lean man with flaming red hair stood over her, his blue eyes narrowed, his unshaven jaws working as he chewed tobacco. One hand rested leisurely on the butt of a pistol. The other rested negligently on his hip.

"Well, gal," he said in a harsh, crackling voice, "we seem t' be all alone in th' world. I reckon ya'd better come with me."

Quicker than an eye could follow, Patricia snatched up the pistol from the sand beside her.

"Hey!" Snacker yelled.

Before the scoundrel could move she had pressed it to her temple.

The hammer clicked.

The pistol was empty!

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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THE SECRET

IT'S not the great big wondrous things
Like jeweled crowns and ruby rings
That women cherish dear;
It's not the fear of God above
Might snatch away the man they love
That turns them cold with fear.

It's just the little joys that bless—
Like sympathy and tenderness!
They wake the precious thrills;
But living close and still apart,
With love stone-dead inside his heart—
Ah, that's the thing that kills.

Jane Burr.

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The Chariot of Sing Lee

By FREDERICK DAVIS

IN the dim windows of the hand laundry, squalidly crowded between the Border Line lunch counter and a warped hardware store in a Montana town, old Sing Lee turned down the gas globes. A pearly half darkness settled over the room, partially hiding the shelves of parcels and the upturned gooseneck cooling on the counter.

The aged Chinaman's slippers went *slf, slf, slf,* as he moved to the door, snapped the lock, and turned to the workrooms behind. Malodorous soap made the air sticky there.

Like a shadow Sing Lee rose on a ladder into his windowless haven above, where candlelight played on the bunks under the rafters and glowing punk sticks sent spirals of fragrance into the air. Sam Wu, Sing Lee's faithful Cantonese, was sitting cross-legged before a stove and making tea in an earthen pot.

The old laundryman sank to his blankets sighing.

"Sam Wu, young and faithful comrade, I am oppressed," he said in his native tongue. "Many nights of late I have dreamed of the lotus pools of Hu'ang, so strangely deepened with water that the buds swim low under the surface. I see a gray bird from Kawnlun fly without wings over me; and from its breast a feather drops and darts into my heart. It is not comforting to an old man, Sam Wu, my endeared one, to die every night in this manner."

Sam Wu above all else was practical.

"It is because you are a lovable stump, venerable one," he answered, watching the steam curl from the teapot spout. "It is

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the blood crowding into your aged heart that makes you dream thus. May not an American doctor—"

"Your talk, my friend, is unchanged and wearying," the old man answered with a wave of one lye-eaten hand. "Have I not repeated to you without end the prophecy that Sing Lee is not to die from a disorder of the heart? Numberless pipefuls I have meditated upon it. Long before my sacred mother first called me Little Peach With Eyes it has been ordained otherwise. It is foretold by the magic sticks of Lang Ki Lung that I shall die by a small pellet as gray as the wings of gulls. How can it be not so?"

Sam Wu shrugged. "Your precious head is of teak," he observed.

"What else," Sing Lee went on questioningly—"what else is so potent to carry me into eternal dreams as the little gray pellet which lies smoked in my pipe? Ah, well, beloved Sam Wu, it cannot be changed. I shall not trouble my light old head about it."

"Sire, you should trouble your light old head enough to go to the doctor," Sam Wu persisted. "Even now, from climbing that short ladder, you gasp like a newborn infant."

"It is true," Sing Lee agreed wearily. "My aged heart is worn and tired of beating. But I shall not trouble my light old head about it. It is not written. Instead, a small gray pellet shall take me to my elder-born."

"Rather the pellet take me than you, benevolent one," the young man said sincerely.

"Praises on you!" the withered creature answered. "Your soul is purer than the snows of the mighty mountains and as firm as the rocks beneath the snows."

They poured amber tea into each other's chipped cups. As they sipped, Sing Lee took from the taboret, where the punk sticks were burning, a teakwood cup which held a bundle of sticks like quills. He spun their tops around the rim until one sliding upward toppled out and lay with Chinese inscriptions plain for both pairs of slanted eyes to see.

"Again," Sing Lee said triumphantly, though softly, "it proclaims the little gray pellet."

From a cunningly hidden crevice behind the bunks in the corner he brought out a tiny can, a bamboo sliver, a pipe. Soon a sticky bit was bubbling in the flame of the tea-stove lamp.

Sing Lee reclined on his cushions as his almond eyes grew dreamy.

"The little gray pellet," he droned with satisfaction.

Before he had drawn twice he heard a stealthy sound. As if by magic his pipe disappeared into the crevice, and Sing Lee stood listening. His thin lips came close to the ear of Sam Wu, whose eyes were shifting searchingly.

"Be careful! Some days ago the young man with but one eye, coming into my shop without money, could not obtain from me the juice he craved. By now he is mad for it, and he has come to rob me. Do I not know?"

Scarcely touching the floor, Sing Lee moved to the candles and with a silent puff extinguished them. Then he bent over the door in the floor, and, inch by inch, noiselessly raised it. His sandals slipped from his heels as his neck craned forward. From below came further sounds of movement; even as he heard them he saw also a flash of light and knew that some one with an electric torch was coming in through a rear window.

His narrow eyes squinted. Robbery would not only deprive him of his profits, but it would endanger him. The old Chinaman had always been scrupulously careful, but the police might learn from a reckless addict where he had obtained the drug. Action to prevent this catastrophe was necessary. While the light was flashing out of sight in the room beyond Sing Lee floated down the ladder.

In the adjoining room he saw a bent figure peering into empty soap boxes and tearing into piles of soiled clothing. Gradually the phantom figure of the Chinaman drifted closer, with one arm upraised, and the palm flat, the fingers stiff. A darting movement—and the man with the flash light fell face downward into an evil-smelling heap of laundry. The old laundryman

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spoke gutturally to Sam Wu, who had materialized behind him.

"The robber will search no further, faithful one."

"It is the young man with but one eye?" Sam Wu took up the burning torch which had fallen.

"Who else? Have I not informed you—"

But Sing Lee swallowed his words. Grasping one arm of the victim, he turned the man over. It was not, after all, the young man of the one eye who had, days previous, so desperately demanded opium. The slanted eyes of the two Chinamen met and wonderd mutually.

"Strange!" Sing Lee mused, putting one soap-eaten hand to his chin. "This face is new. It has never come into my shop before."

"Perhaps a traveler," Sam Wu suggested, "who heard from afar and came in need."

"He has not the appearance," Sing Lee differed.

He bent over—and almost toppled. Only Sam Wu's swift grasp kept the old man from falling into the clothing heap beside the American.

Sing Lee sank limply a few moments, his head lolling, until Sam Wu felt strength returning to the soft muscles.

"Beloved idiot! When will it lodge in your venerable head that you must go to a doctor? Excitement, even the slightest, is deadly to you. Your heart is eaten like the core of an infested oak."

Sing Lee stiffened himself. "Is this the time for such preaching, faithful one? Who is this young man who came to rob us?"

Their yellow fingers searched through the pockets of the American's coat, bringing out several personal letters and an official envelope.

"Paul Foster," the old Chinaman read. The papers inside were credentials. "United States Secret Service," he spelled out. The old man staggered, but gripped himself again. "Frowns of my fathers! Some of the empty-headed fools to whom I have sold the syrup have talked!"

Sam Wu, the practical-minded, nodded. "It is well, beloved sire," he said, "that your finger-ends thrust on his neck were like the points of so many knives against his spinal cord."

Sing Lee replaced the papers in the pockets of the coat.

"As you say, Sam Wu, it is well. But if it is known that he had come to search my poor laundry shop?"

"If he is not to be found," the younger man gestured, "they can say nothing against us."

Sing Lee nodded quickly. "Sam Wu, wisest servant, silently harness that creature in the barn who is thinner than my ancestral grandmother dead four centuries hence."

The younger Chinaman slid the bolt of the back door and sidled out. Letting himself into the stable, he quickly harnessed the old nag which was standing half asleep in the stall, drew the beast into the outer darkness, and fastened it to a dilapidated wagon.

"Sing Lee Fine Hand Laundry" was lettered in white on the sides of the vehicle. It was a familiar sight in the streets of the Montana town and had become known as Sing Lee's chariot. When Sam Wu hastened again into the laundry room Sing Lee was supporting a form by his side.

"Aid the gentleman out, Sam Wu," the old man said in a low voice. "He is weary of walking."

They went to the wagon in the darkness, supporting the third man between them. Sam Wu took the seat, and assisted the form to an upright position beside him. Sing Lee hurried back into the building and returned lugging a gooseneck, long discarded because of rust, and a length of rope.

"Let us go," he said, as he climbed into the seat, wheezing. The form beside him leaned heavily upon him. "The gentleman is eager to be off."

As the wagon creaked over the black road, Sing Lee bent forward and looped the rope.

"Sam Wu, faithful comrade," he asked, rising, breathing gaspingly, "what is best for us now? Shall we fly and by flying inform this young man's superiors that he has called upon us? Or shall we remain in

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our humble shop and labor at our tubs? If necessary, Sam Wu, the Canadian border can be reached in a few hours' travel, even by that hideous skeleton drawing our chariot."

Sam Wu agreed. "It is true; to fly would be unwise—a confession of guilt."

"Good. We will remain. Is that a bridge I see just ahead, that form in the darkness, Sam Wu?"

"We shall halt a moment," Sam Wu said easily as they jolted upon the span. "The moonlight on the water has an unrivaled beauty to-night. The gentleman wishes to view it."

They alighted. A swift, bundling movement of their forms followed. A splash was lost in the rippling of the river. Sam Wu climbed at once into the wagon again, and Sing Lee started to follow—but he paused, gripping the rim of one wagon wheel with fingers of white, his eyes half closed, his body sagging.

"Honorable sire," Sam Wu began in alarm, "had I only in my body your aged heart—"

"Pray, silence!" the old man put in, raising himself at last to the seat. "Let us return with all haste." His breath whirred.

The vehicle rattled over the road again. It came into the town unnoticed. In the shed, Sam Wu unharnessed the bony horse while Sing Lee climbed the ladder to the room under the rafters. He was reclining on his bunk and roasting a pellet in the candle flame when Sam Wu's head came through the floor.

"Let us sleep, my young comrade," he said.

Soon he drifted into a more celestial world. In the lotus pools of Hu'ang blossoms were drowning, and over the water came flying a wingless bird who dropped a gray feather down. And then even the vision vanished around old Sing Lee, leaving an emptiness.

II.

A WEEK went by, filled with work at gray tubs, bowls of thick starch, sizzling irons—a week of uneasiness and apprehension masked in the inscrutability of two yellow faces. The stolidity of ancient China was serene against the commercial bustle of the Montana town. At the close of the hour of midday rice the old laundryman was resting in his raftered haven.

"Centuries past it was written in the wisdom of Lao Ti," Sing Lee droned to himself as he whirled the sticks in the cup of Lang Ki Lung, "that the strength of the darkness shall become the power of the children of the night, so then and forever."

One slender pencil whirled out of the box and fell between his pointed knees.

"Again! Always the prophecy of the gray pellet. Ah, but a pleasant death, a death of dreams," he smiled. "Yes, it is ordained that by the ashes of my own poppy juice I shall die."

He jerked and listened intently. His ears had caught the sound of an automobile stopping in front of his shop. The nearest crack in the clapboards gave him a thin view of the pavement below.

His own chariot, the mare's head drooping, was standing there; and a cheap automobile had halted behind it, from which a huge man had alighted. The aged heart of Sing Lee gave a flutter.

This was the sheriff—Sheriff Braintree! The old laundryman did not lose a single precious moment in consternation. With a movement of garments he was gone, vanished as though the air had dissolved him.

III.

SHERIFF BRAINTREE'S weight caused the moist floor of the laundry-shop to creak under his feet. Taciturn and grim-mannered, he had earned a remarkable reputation in his county.

"One-Shot" Braintree he was called because of this peculiar habit of handling a gun. He had or seemed to have a reverence for lead, or at least an aversion to wasting it; he had never used his gun, never had fired, until it was absolutely necessary. And when he did use his weapon, he used it as little as possible.

He judged long; he never pulled a trigger until he was sure his shot would tell; then he fired, and that settled the matter. One

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shot was usually enough. Hence his nickname.

Six months previous, in broad daylight, an autoload of bandits had invaded the Cheshire County Bank. Ambling up the street at a distance, Sheriff Braintree had seen their escape from the building with flashing weapons and valises fat with stolen currency.

When the four bandits' car had headed in his direction at lightning speed he had stepped into the shelter of a fat maple. Not until the criminals reached a spot almost opposite him did he appear about to do anything but stupidly watch them pass. But he was judging his shot. Then in a flash he fired.

The bullet put the driver completely out of business for all time. The steering-wheel whirled from his limp hands; the car knocked down a fence, and drove into a tree, catapulting the others out. Something of the sort was inevitable.

One of the three remaining men was knocked unconscious; the second pair halted short when they heard Braintree shout and saw his gun leveled at them. And so the bank holdup ended abruptly. Braintree might have filled the quartet with a gunful of lead from the shelter of the tree, but he had chosen to fire no more than was absolutely necessary. Just once, this time, was enough.

"You'd think his bullets were made of gold," the cowmen of the county said, "or he hates to spill any blood. Anyway, he's queer about his shootin', shore 'nough."

As Braintree stood in Sing Lee's Fine Hand Laundry, his six-shooter made a bulge in his coat at his hip.

Sam Wu ironed industriously under the big man's gaze.

"Where's the boss-chink?" the sheriff asked.

"No here," Sam Wu answered.

"Where is he?"

"He gone. Wen' 'way. No here."

"*Where* is he?" the sheriff demanded again. "I want to see him, understand?"

Sam Wu ironed on placidly. "He go 'way. No know w'ere he go. Jus' go."

"Listen to me, Sam Wu. I've got a warrant to search this place—understand?"

Sam Wu shrugged. "Searchee—you fin' nodding." It was not the sheriff's first visit for that purpose.

"I'm not so sure of that. People in this town don't get opium from nowhere."

"Sing Lee lun laundly," Sam Wu said. "No lun hop-house."

"That's just what I'm here to make sure of," Braintree answered with characteristic bluntness. "Guess you know of the one-eyed young fellow that died of starvation in the hospital this morning—because he'd been eating opium, and the ashes formed a kind of cement over the walls of his stomach. And there's more like him in this town. I'm going to look this place over again. Strictly speaking, it's not my business, but I'm interesting myself for reasons of my own. Have you seen a young chap around here named Foster—Paul Foster—"

"Might bling laundly," Sam Wu said blandly.

"No, he didn't bring any laundry. He was coming up here on business; he said so when he stopped in my office to talk with me before he came around. He was after information on the situation up here, and I haven't heard from him for a week—that's why I'm looking into this matter again on my own hook."

"No see him," Sam Wu repeated. "Jus' washee laundly, no see nobody."

"Hmm! Might as well talk to a hitching post as to you damn Chinese," the sheriff growled. "Take a look at this, you, if you need it—" He snapped an official paper flat before the almond eyes. "That's the warrant, and this time I'm going to search *right*."

"Searchee," Sam Wu bade again. "Searchee all day. You fin' nodding."

The little yellow man continued ironing as the sheriff strode into the room behind. Braintree grimaced; the air was damp and unhealthy—strong smells rose from the heaps of unwashed laundry and the tubs of gray suds. Going to the ladder in the corner, Braintree mounted, the crossboards creaking under his weight; he moved about Sing Lee's room investigatingly, tapping the walls and prodding into the bedding on the bunk.

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Nowhere that he saw could anything as bulky as tins of opium be hidden. The punk-dishes and the tea-stove were innocent-looking, too. "Nothing here," Braintree decided, and went down the ladder again.

Moving between the tubs, he began to probe through the heaps of soiled clothing, to tap the walls again, to stamp on the floor. He felt reasonably sure that somewhere in these rooms opiates were hidden. The wiliness and cunning of the Oriental mind had bested him in the past; all his efforts had not proved that the place was anything other than an ordinary Chinese laundry with two silent yellow men attending strictly to business.

Still, the very business gave many opportunities for passing opium out to addicts; and if this was being done—though he had never surprised any one carrying illegal drugs away—the supply must be in the store. The added fact that the young secret service agent had not returned to Braintree's office since his appearance, a week ago, was cause for a suspicion of foul play. This time the sheriff was determined to search thoroughly; his knuckles rapped hard and his eyes peered.

But he prodded and poked unsuccessfully. Few places of concealment were possible in these barest of walls. Braintree was disgruntled and about to abandon his purpose when he noticed, half hidden under a mound of soiled white, several wooden boxes of soap. They were steel-banded as packed in a factory, and they bore express labels.

"Never noticed that before," Braintree mused. Why should the chinks buy soap by express when they can get it more quickly and as cheap from the wholesale house near here?"

Curiously he took a hammer from the shelf and, with a creaking of nails, pried the cover off the box. The mosaic of wrappers which was revealed looked guiltless enough. The sheriff pried out a cake, peeled the paper off it, and disclosed common yellow soap. He puzzled over it.

"I always supposed," he thought, "that laundries used special flakes and chemicals instead of this kitchen stuff."

The bar seemed heavy in his hand—unusually heavy. He opened his pen-knife and cut into it; as he split it apart, a blackish syrup dripped from a tin-foil container concealed in the center.

"Jehosephat!" he exclaimed. "I thought so!"

He swung out of the rear room into the front one—and gasped. Sam Wu was gone! Undoubtedly the Chinaman had heard the nails of the soap-box squeal and had taken the alarm.

His gooseneck was cooling on the board, a shirt lay half ironed. Braintree peered under the counter and ran back into the rear room—but no Sam Wu!

The wall telephone, fogged with steam, rang shrilly. Braintree hurried on, disregarding it, but changed his mind and brought himself up suddenly.

"Hullo?" he barked into the instrument.

"Braintree?" a familiar voice sang. "Glad I knew where you were headed and caught you. Harper talking." Harper was one of the sheriff's deputies. "The coroner's office just called up. A body has been found in the river."

"Speed up!" the sheriff snapped.

"It's young Foster—the secret service man, you remember. Some marks on his ankles show that a weight was tied to 'em, but it must have broken loose. Bad condition—but the papers in his pockets identified him all right. His neck was broken. From the marks of long fingernails in his skin I'd say it was done by one of those Oriental death-blows—"

Braintree waited to hear no more. He clashed the receiver up, banged out the street door and stared up and down the thoroughfare. No Chinaman was to be seen.

"Skipped! Right out of my fingers!"

He remembered that Sing Lee's chariot had been standing at the curb when he had drawn his flivver to a halt. Now it, too, was gone. Braintree hurried to the hardware dealer who was standing on his front steps industriously chewing tobacco.

"Did you see the chink drive off in his wagon?" he demanded.

"Yah. Little w'ile ago Sam Wu came out with a big basket of clothes and drove

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off. That way—" the hardware dealer pointed.

Braintree jumped into his flivver and set its motor whirring. The car vibrated violently, rattling and squeaking, as it moved away from the curb. The sheriff peered up and down the by-streets as he crossed the intersections. He circled, soon covering the major part of the little town.

Where had the Chinaman vanished? Undoubtedly he had taken to a country road—bent on reaching the Canadian border. Braintree drew his flivver to a halt beside a little shanty at the base of a semaphore where railroad tracks crossed the street, and inquired of the signaler:

"Seen a Chinaman's laundry wagon go past here?"

"Chinaman? Dunno. So many things go past. Well, hold on a minute. Guess I did see him, too. Noticed him because he rushed under the guards just as they was comin' down. In an awful hurry, he was. Went on up the road, I'd say. Not much chance to turn off 'n it."

Braintree sent his car rattling on again. Only one road led straight away from the village toward the north—the chase was becoming surer. He stepped on the gas and sped ahead.

His car seemed about to shake itself to pieces. Steam began to sizzle from the radiator cap and the engine pounded heavily, but Braintree was intent only on making as much speed as possible.

"Hope the gas holds out!" he breathed.

He skidded around a curve at the top of a hill after a half hour of fast driving and saw, far in the distance, a shallow wagon speeding toward the north. It was the chariot of Sing Lee, and Sam Wu was whipping the old horse frantically. Braintree pressed the gas to its farthest limit; his car spurted ahead at a reckless rate.

He was astonished that the Chinaman's wagon could fly over the road so swiftly. The old horse was almost crazy from the lashing it was receiving. Sam Wu, looking back, saw the sheriff approaching and whipped the beast even more furiously.

Braintree knew that the animal could not endure much longer, that it was only a matter of minutes until it would slow or drop. The Chinaman could not escape now. It was quite impossible for him safely to reach the distant border. The game was up, though Sam Wu seemed not to realize it, and continued to flog the old mare frightfully.

Braintree's victory, however, was a half measure. Sam Wu was merely a hireling of Sing Lee—the aged Chinaman was the real manipulator of the opium stock, the brains of the duet. The thought that Sing Lee, the chief offender, had escaped, rankled in the sheriff's mind.

"The crafty old devil is gone Lord knows where," he lamented. "If only I had my hands on him instead of this second fiddle I'd be doing the job up proud!"

The car edged closer upon the wagon. Braintree lifted his big gun from its holster.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Slow down, there!"

But Sam Wu whipped the horse even more violently, and the frantic beast, tossing its head, leaped forward at a madder speed.

IV.

BEHIND the seat on which Sam Wu was crouching was a sheet-covered basket of what was presumably clothes. It shifted and jumped as the wagon wheels flew over hollows in the road; and now and again muffled grunts were wrenched from it. Half smothered, doubled into a cramped position, old Sing Lee was concealed among his own laundry.

Upon his first sight of Braintree in front of his shop, he had slipped into the basket for concealment, and had been carried out later, unseen, by the strong arms of Sam Wu. Now as his body was jolted roughly by the speeding wagon, his heart thumped with fear.

Through a small hole in the meshes of the wicker his slanted eyes caught glimpses of the car speeding after him. How close it was coming! Sing Lee could see even the grim set of the sheriff's lips, and the determination in the big man's frown.

"Frowns of my forefathers," he moaned. "It is useless. Sam Wu is doomed."

Sam Wu—but not necessarily Sing Lee. If the younger Chinaman was captured, per-

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haps the chariot would be abandoned in the road while Sam Wu would be returned to the village in the official auto; if so, Sing Lee could slip away from his basket and escape after the sheriff had gone back with his prisoner.

Or perhaps the old mare would be tied to the rear of Braintree's car as they retraced their course which, too, would give the old Chinaman an opportunity to creep away into the fields. Sam Wu, the faithful, the devoted, would say nothing. He could aid his beloved sire to escape if humanly possible; and even though he were himself incarcerated, he would accept the full punishment for their misdeeds rather than say anything that would betray old Sing Lee, his master.

"Where, among even the celestials, could I find another so devoted as my Cantonese?" Sing Lee had often wondered.

He peered again with difficulty through the hole in the side of the basket, at Braintree speeding after them. Then he thought of the lotus pools of Hu'ang, of which he had dreamed so often, of the wingless bird from Kwan-lun, of the prophecies of Lang Ki Lung—and smiled confidently.

"The honorable sheriff shall not find me," he assured himself. "Has it not since the day of my birth been ordained that a little gray pellet—"

At that moment he saw, through the aperture, Braintree pull out his huge six-shooter.

"Merciful prophets!"

A dazing revelation burst upon him, a revelation that cleared his mind's eye and caused his old heart to swell to the bursting point. Yes, before even the day when his sacred mother had first called him Little Peach with Eyes it was written that a gray pellet should kill him; but Sing Lee had always interpreted it as the smoked ball of opium in his pipe. The light of his sudden realization showed another possibility to his mind—*lead!*

The man speeding down upon him, whose eyes were fixed so grimly in his direction, was known as One-Shot Braintree. His gun was flashing in the sun! How clear it all was now!

Ah, it was written long, then, as it had been foretold frequently by the magic sticks of Lang Ki Lung, that Sing Lee would die by—a bullet! Even now the fates were swooping down upon him! Even now a voice as from the farther worlds was shouting in his ears:

"Stop—slow down, there!"

Sing Lee's heart swelled like a straining bladder.

"Illustrious Writers of Unseen Wisdoms!" he murmured. "My moment has come!"

And almost upon his last word a sharp report roared out: *Bang!*

Sing Lee felt himself leap upward and scream. Even as he moved in midair blackness closed in upon him—eternal blackness.

Sam Wu, frightened by the cry, turned and saw Sing Lee's soft form slide off the wagon and fall into the dust of the road. Braintree skidded around it. In despairful concern for his beloved elder, Sam Wu pulled short, leaped down, sped back—but he halted short before the leveled weapon of the sheriff.

"Go slow there, chink," Braintree ordered gruffly. "No need to run after that yellow bird so fast. 'Cause he's plumb, absolutely dead."

V.

BRAINTREE, telling his story to the Secret Service agent who came, said:

"Don't pay any attention to what that young chink says about gray pellets. Sure, Sing Lee was as gone as a door nail when we picked him out of the road, but I didn't shoot him; he just naturally kicked off from heart failure, the coroner said. Probably he *thought* he was shot, though, because a second before he jumped out of that basket, surprising me more than anything else in the world ever did, the right front tire of my flivver blew out. It sounded like a gun going off, but it wasn't. No, sir, there's not a mark on Sing Lee's yellow body. This time," he finished, smiling and putting one broad hand caressingly over his weapon, "it didn't take even one shot to finish off the case!"

THE END

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Rogues' Rule

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "Kidnaped By Request," "Soft Money," etc.

CHAPTER XIX (*Continued*).

"MICKY FLANAGAN KILLED A COP."

"LOOK what was hiding in a closet," said Jeffords, derisively. "It says it's the caretaker."

All three roared with laughter. Jack thought they were the most unpleasant looking trio he had ever seen. Big and brutal as Jeffords was, he looked less evil than the other two; though Jack knew that he had slain a man in cold blood.

They were the sort of hoboes who may be found camping near railroad lines in the West; whiskered, ragged foul-smelling tramps; how they had penetrated within the boundaries of a big city like Dudley without being arrested on suspicion he could not understand. Jeffords, who had been an occasional stevedore, a lumber yard worker, and a ward heeler, was an aristocrat compared to the others. But he had degenerated since Jack's last meeting with him.

"Bump him off. A stiff is no trouble," suggested one of the trio.

"Aw, what's the use of killin' the bloke," demurred the second.

"Sure," said Jeffords. "He ain't worth steppin' on. Just wrap a few ropes around him and chuck him in the coal hole."

"But we got to stay here a couple o' days till you get hold of that money guy," protested the first man. "We don't want this lamb bleatin' around."

"Who's goin' to hear him in the coal hole?" laughed Jeffords. "Rustle around downstairs and find a clothes line."

The pair made their exit while Jeffords dropped into a chair and began to hum the refrain of that grim song of his. Jack thought he might collect some information from the murderer.

"Gee, you're strong!" he remarked. "Were you ever in the prize ring?"

"Sure," replied the big man. "I stood up to the best heavies of ten years ago."

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"What's a good guy like you doing with those two cheap hoboes? You are no tramp," ventured Jack.

"Say, you ain't so damn dumb," replied Jeffords. "Matter of fact I only been on the road a short while and I'm going to quit it. I blew out of a town not a thousand miles from here a couple of weeks ago with a big bundle of dough. But, like a boob, I got drunk in a joint and a dame copped my roll.

"That didn't worry me much, because I knew I could get more, but I was busted, and I climbed into a sidedoor Pullman to get back here. I met up with these two bums, and they had a bottle. I gets liquored up again and told them I was coming here for a bundle of jack, so they joins me. Just as soon as I land my coin I'll give them the air."

He was beaming at Jack, evidently flattered by the caretaker's good judgment in realizing that he was of different clay from his friends.

"They don't look to me like fellows you could get rid of easily."

"Say, I could pick up one in each hand and bust their heads together. But I need them in my business, see."

The conversation was interrupted by the sound of feet on the stairs.

"I'm not going to give you away," said Jack hastily. "You don't have to stick me in the coal hole. You're a good fellow."

"Here's the rope," said one of the tramps bursting into the room. "And here's a towel to shut his mouth with."

"Aw, this shrimp ain't such a bad guy," declared Jeffords. "I guess I'll just tie him up good, and let it go at that. You won't holler, will you, feller?"

"You bet I won't," assented Jack earnestly.

"The first yip out of you the towel goes into your mouth."

"Look here, friend," announced the most evil of the two men. "We got to look out for ourselves. We don't want to do a stretch in this town for the sake of a goof like him. Either choke the life out of him or jamb him into the coal hole. See?"

"Right, 'bo," agreed the second man.

Jeffords stood up and slouched towards the first tramp. Suddenly, like a rattlesnake's spring, his right fist shot into the man's face. He fell heavily, knocked out cold.

"Want any of my stuff?" he demanded of the second man, who was gazing, blear eyed, at his fallen pal.

"No, no. Not me."

"All right. I don't take any lip from no one."

"Now tie this bird up, but don't hurt him. We got to keep him tied, but we don't stick him in the coal hole."

The tramp approached Jack and proceeded to tie his arms and legs, then wrapped the clothes line a dozen times around his body. Finally he tipped Jack over on the floor and left him there, unable to move hand or foot.

By this time the victim of Jefford's fist had recovered enough to sit up on the floor and gaze at the big man with a look of astonishment and reproach.

"What was the idea of knocking me out?" he demanded. "I never done nothin' to you."

"You give me back talk. You two bums might as well understand now that I'm the boss. I brung you here and promised you some coin. You get it, but if you get fresh with me I'll murder the pair of you. I'm a killer, I am."

"Well, what you going to do with this caretaker?"

"Let him lay where he is. We go back to bed. He'll be all right."

The two men went out reluctantly. At the door the fellow who had been knocked out threw a look at Jeffords, which was so full of viciousness that it boded ill for the prize fighter if he didn't watch his step.

"I'm much obliged to you," said Jack from the floor. "That fellow you hit looked at you when he went out as though he might stick a knife in your back."

"Aw, he's a rat," growled Jeffords. "I'll lock the door though, 'cause he might sneak in while I'm asleep. Say, I'll stick a pillow under your head. It's the best I can do."

"I'm much obliged," repeated Jack, really grateful. He was in a bad fix, but he would have been in a much worse one had the others been allowed their way.

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The big man went back to bed, and in five minutes was snoring.

Jack was busy with his thoughts. From what Jeffords had told him it was evident that Toadsby had paid him a large sum to kill Munroe. The man had been robbed of his blood money, and had naturally determined to return to Dudley, get in touch with Lem and secure a second supply. Just why he had brought his two disreputable confederates with him Jack could not figure out; perhaps he would find the reason later. Jeffords had evidently promised each of them some money.

What a strange situation! He had wished for nothing more in this world than to come face to face for a second time with the man who had killed Munroe, whose capture and confession would implicate Toadsby, ruin him, probably send him to jail or the chair, as accessories were liable to capital punishment in this State; and he had been granted his wish. As a result, he lay bound and helpless; that he had not been slaughtered out of hand was due to the rough kindliness of the murderer, who had defended him against men even less scrupulous than himself.

The night passed somehow. In the morning the tramps descended to the kitchen, apparently cooked coffee and ate breakfast; they must have brought food with them. So that he could be watched Jeffords picked up the captive, brought him to the ground floor and tossed him on a sofa in the big library. After breakfast Jeffords brought him in half a loaf of bread and a cup of coffee, unfastened his hands so that he could eat, patted him on the back and said:

"Don't worry, kid. I ain't got nothin' against you."

Neither of the regular tramps came near him. About ten o'clock Jeffords came into the library.

"Is the telephone in this place connected?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"In the front hall in back of the stairs."

The murderer went into the hall, leaving the library door open, and then Jack heard him give a number. In a moment he heard the following one-sided conversation:

"Want to talk to Mr. Toadsby?

"That you, Senator?

"Yeh. It's me, Martin.

"I'm in town.

"I know I promised, but I got robbed, I ain't got a cent.

"Sure, but I got to have some coin.

"Aw, be a good fellow!

"Another thousand.

"No, sir, not a cent less. I ought to ha' got five for that job.

"You got to give it to me.

"You don't dare peep. You know what I could do if you did.

"I won't tell you where I am.

"Yeh, I know you sprung me on the other case, but I paid you good money. I won't go till I get it.

"I'll find a way to get it out of you. And I won't go to the police either. Hey! The son of a gun hung up on me!"

Grumbling, he went down the cellar stairs while Jack thought over what he had heard. Toadsby had more nerve than he had supposed; he had refused to permit the fellow to blackmail him.

Looking at it from Lem's point of view, he had done the wise thing. Jeffords could not accuse Toadsby of a connection with the crime without incriminating himself. He had to admit that he had killed Munroe at Toadsby's instigation, but while such a confession would send him to the chair he had no way of proving that Lem had engaged him for the work. The money had been cash, there were no witnesses. Toadsby was right to refuse to be held up, and Jeffords was a fool to suppose that he would submit.

Presently the three men came up the basement stairs and passed into the drawing-room. To Jack's surprise Jeffords did not seem downcast in the least. He was apparently issuing instructions.

"You birds got to shave and clean up," he said. "There is a razor in the bathroom, and this guy we have tied up has got some clothes up in the bedroom that you can get into. Clean collars and neckties and shaves whether you like it or not. Come on upstairs."

Evidently something was in the wind, the nature of which he could not surmise.

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A couple of hours later the trio, laughing loudly, descended the stairs, and Jeffords pushed them into the library.

"You caretaker, take a look," he said with a boisterous bellow.

Jack saw with disgust that the tramps were dressed in his own clothes, wore his shirts and his ties. One of them had a pair of his shoes. Jeffords had also shaved and brushed himself, but he was the worst looking of the three. He was too big to wear Jack's clothes.

"You couldn't make gents out of these bums even by dressin' them up," exclaimed Jeffords.

"You ain't no dude yourself, you big stiff," growled the man who had been punished the night before.

"Now, don't you go and get dirty before we have to go out," said Jeffords. "And don't get liquored up. This job has to be done right or I'll maul the pair of yer!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE HOUSE FILLS UP.

ABOUT half an hour later Jeffords came into the library. It was evident he had been at the bottle again, if not the original bottle another one, for he was in a jovial mood. It seemed to Jack that he might be induced to ameliorate his lot so he groaned piteously. As a matter of fact his entire body was aching, and he yearned to scratch his nose.

"Huh," said Jeffords, noticing the groan. "What you need is a drink."

"Were you ever bound hand and foot for ten or twelve hours?" demanded Jack.

"I'd like to meet the man that could tie me up."

"I don't see why you keep me tied. There are three of you and you could break me in small pieces all by yourself."

"Sure I could," said the big man cheerfully, as he seated himself in a big leather chair and regarded the victim on the sofa.

"Well, why don't you take these things off me? I won't try to get away."

"Don't care if I do," Jeffords said agreeably. He drew out a huge pocket knife, a duplicate of the one which had murdered Munroe, and slashed the ropes. With a cry of satisfaction Flanders stretched out his arms, kicked his legs and sat up.

"You are a darn good fellow," he said, and at the moment he meant it.

"'S all right, kid. Only don't try any funny business. You keep away from that phone, and don't get fresh with the fellers, 'cause they're tough eggs."

"I won't. Say, what are those two bums doing in my clothes?"

"They got a job to do, that's why I keep 'em."

"How did you know this house was vacant?"

"My old woman used to do washin' here for the people that moved out. I didn't know they put a caretaker in."

"As a matter of fact," Jack told him as he rubbed the stiffness out of his arms, "I'm not a caretaker. Don't get excited. I just slipped in here and camped because I knew the house was furnished and nobody lived in it."

"The hell you did!" said Jeffords with a pleased grin. "Are you hiding out or something?"

"The police are looking for me because of a little job I did, they were watching the railroad stations and I fooled them by getting into this house."

"Well, say," exclaimed the giant, "why didn't you say so in the first place? Put it there."

He extended a big paw and almost fractured the bones in Jack's slim hand in a grip of fellowship.

"I didn't know what you fellows were up to. I thought you might be detectives."

"That's a good one. Detectives! What did you do to get the police after you?"

"Not a darn thing. But a lawyer named Toadsby framed me, and I had to make a get-away."

"You don't say. Why, the darn little runt done me a dirty trick, too. I had him on the telephone this mornin', and he turned me down. I done him a big favor and he gave me some coin. I lost it and came back for some more, and he told me to go to hell!"

"Isn't there some way you can get even with him?"

"You said it. I'm goin' to get even with

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him and get the coin, too. I know a lot about that guy he don't know about. Say" —some impulse of discretion took possession of him, he stopped short, regarded Jack suspiciously—"how do I know you ain't handin' me a lot of bull so you can make your get-away?"

Jack laughed cheerfully. "I don't want to get away. If I show my nose outside the bulls will grab me."

Jeffords looked almost convinced, and that moment the telephone rang loudly. To answer a phone is an involuntary impulse. Both men half rose.

"What's that, do you s'pose?" asked Jeffords. Jack realized it was probably Sturgis or Fred Everett calling him. If he did not reply they would assume he had slipped out for a little while.

"Somebody trying to get the people who moved out of here, I suppose."

"Yeh. Well, we'll let it ring. Now I tell you what, young fellow, I guess you are all right, and I ain't going to push you into the hands of the bulls, but you mind your own business, see? Don't go butting into anything that happens around here. We're in this house for a darn good reason. Later in the day I may have to tie you up again or lock you in a room upstairs."

"Couldn't I help in this game of yours?"

"No, we don't need no help. You mind yer own business."

"Very well," said Jack, looking offended.

"Maybe I can think o' something you can do later," said the giant to mollify him. Jeffords was a simple soul, a big man with the brain of a bad boy of about fourteen. He was good natured when he wasn't too drunk, and while he had no objection to assassination if it was made worth his while, he was like the burglar in the song in "Pirates of Penzance"—when not practicing his profession, he liked to be a good fellow.

From Jack's standpoint the situation was very much better. He had the use of his limbs, his wits were much better than those of the three fellow lodgers. Jeffords and Toadsby were on the outs, and when thieves and murderers fall cut there is a chance for honest men.

Lem Toadsby had been considerably perturbed when the voice of Martin Jeffords, whom he had supposed to be hundreds of miles away and afraid to come back, spoke to him on the telephone. The demand for more money annoyed him greatly. Was it not bad enough to have Sam Stone, the master blackmailer, beginning his wicked attack on Lem's bank account without this low-browed thug assuming that he would be a perpetual source of revenue? There was only one way to deal with Jeffords, refuse positively to aid him further and defy him. The man's lack of gratitude was disgusting. Lem reminded him how he had once saved him from the electric chair and the fellow had the impudence to tell him that he had been well paid for that trifling service. He had sharply and emphatically refused to have anything more to do with him and warned him that the slightest effort on Jeffords's part to injure himself would probably send the ex-prize fighter to the chair.

Just the same, a man who knows that he has deeply offended the law, dislikes the feeling that there is a disgruntled confederate about. If he knew the fellow's whereabouts he could probably have him arrested on some trumped-up charge, and secure his release on the promise of the man to leave town again. In that case he might give him fifty dollars to pay his carfare. But Jeffords had probably called from a pay station and, locating the pay station, would do him no good.

He worried a little as the morning wore on; if Stone were only to be trusted to play fair he would have wished his advice, but Stone knew too much for Lem's good already. Jeffords would probably hang around for a day or two and then drift.

Just before lunch he was favored by a visit from a chastened Mr. Whitefield, who offered him a Wilson Biscuit Company check for five thousand dollars, with a letter from President Loomis presenting it to him as a retainer.

There seemed no good reason why he should not accept a retaining fee from the Wilson Biscuit Company since the scheme to ruin the Bently outfit had been abandoned, so the lawyer accepted the fee gra-

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ciously, shook hands with the secretary and bowed him out.

He lunched with Mrs. Scott at the Grand Hotel, listened with his celebrated patience and humility to a lot of long-winded plans for cleaning up Dudley and driving Sam Stone out of the city, then went back to his office, and put in a busy afternoon. When he departed for his lodgings he had dismissed from his mind the incident of Martin Jeffords's ingratitude.

He was planning to run out to Everton in the evening and bring his affair with Mary to a head, but business intervened. The bell to his apartment rang, and when he answered the speaking tube somebody said:

"Is this Senator Toadsby?"

"Yes."

"Can I see you on business?"

"Come to my office at ten to-morrow morning."

"This is important. Must see you now."

"Come up," said Toadsby, pressing the button which released the door below.

In a moment two men entered the room. They were rough visaged, but well dressed. Why not? They wore the clothes of one of the best dressed men in town, Jack Flanders.

"What's your business?" demanded Lem. A criminal lawyer does not shun rough characters, for when such men seek a lawyer, they are usually willing to pay.

"It's this way, Senator," said the most vicious looking of the pair. "Three of us cracked a crib. We got a lot of dough. But the watchman shot the chief and he can't be moved. Now we got to make tracks, but he wants to know what to do and he sent us to ask you to come and see him. He'll pay for legal advice, he's got plenty of coin."

It wasn't the first time Lem had interviewed a member of the underworld in hiding and he usually found it very profitable. A burglar who was flat on his back was apt to be very generous with the lawyer who protected him. Lem saw nothing suspicious in their story, but he was rather annoyed because he had other plans for the evening. However, in view of his large payments recently he was more anxious for money than usual.

"Where is this place, far away?"

"It's a house on Lucus Street. We'll take you there."

Lem excused himself for a moment, placed his wallet, after removing a few dollars in change, and his presentation gold watch and chain, in a wall safe in his chamber. Then he put on his hat and accompanied the men cheerfully into the street, where they stopped a taxicab, got in, and were soon at the lower end of Lucus Street.

They descended and walked up the street until they reached the house where Jack was a prisoner. The policeman on the beat passed, and, although it was dark, recognized Toadsby, greeted him cordially as "Senator," and thought nothing of the fact that the politician was ascending the steps of a house in the block, for whatever Toadsby, the next district attorney, did in Dudley was perfectly all right.

One of the men rang the bell, and the door was opened. Lem hesitated to enter a dark hallway, then a huge hand grasped him by the throat and hauled him inside. He was pushed violently into the drawing-room, the electric light went on and the great criminal lawyer looked into the grim face of the giant, Martin Jeffords.

Lem recovered his sang-froid immediately, straightened his necktie, which had been twisted over his ear by the grasp of the ex-prize fighter, and regarded Jeffords with a sneer.

'Oh, it's you, is it? I might have known there was some trick in view of the fact that you phoned me this morning. What do you want?"

"You know what I want?"

"Who are your friends? Do they know all about you?"

Jeffords turned on the pair of tramps who had crowded in to be present at the interview. He did not care to furnish them with any facts that Lem might be moved to present.

"You boes get out of here," he growled. "I'll talk to this bird alone."

"The hell you will!" said the spokesman of the pair. "We're in this and we stay."

"You know what I gave you last night?"

"I call on you men to be present at this

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interview," Lem declared. "I want you to know something about your associate so you can get away while your necks are safe."

Jeffords grasped the two men, ran them to the cellar stairs and pushed them down. Then he slammed the door and bolted it. Toadsby took advantage of the diversion by rushing to the front door, but before he got it open, the giant was upon him and pushed him back into the drawing-room, so violently this time that the statesman fell upon the floor.

"Excuse me, counselor," said Jeffords with a grin. "I didn't mean to be so rough. You ain't treatin' me right, Mr. Toadsby. You was thoughtless to-day on the phone."

"What's the idea of luring me here? It won't do you any good."

"Yes, it will. I've got to get some more money from you. You're rich, and I saved you from being ruined, you told me so yourself."

Lem was not afraid of Martin Jeffords. He cringed before Sam Stone, he had a sense of conscious inferiority in the presence of Jack Flanders that infuriated him, but when he dealt with men like the giant who confronted him he was so sure of his superior craft that he was not alarmed at his situation. It was like a bull endeavoring to outwit a fox.

"I'll give you a hundred dollars to get out of town because I like you and don't want you to get into trouble. You were seen and recognized in Munroe's room, and the police are looking for you."

"Then I need more money," declared Jeffords. "Besides, I promised to give them two fellers five hundred between them for getting you here. I was going to take a thousand, now I got to have five grand."

Lem laughed scornfully.

"I haven't got it, and if I had I wouldn't give it to you. Now what are you going to do?"

"You come through or I give you what I gave Munroe."

"It wouldn't get you any money to murder me, so you won't do that."

"If I ain't goin' to get any, I might. They can't do more than send me to the chair if they get me, and I might as well bump off two men as one."

"Three, you mean. You forget the fellow in the railroad yard."

"Oh, him? He was nothin'. Now you give me five grand and be quick about it!"

"Do you suppose I carry large sums of money on my person? I would have to give you a check. You come to my office in the morning and I shall give it to you."

"I ain't such a fool," trumpted Jeffords. "You write out a check here and I send out and get it cashed in the morning. Then I let you go."

"I haven't got so much money in the bank."

"You're a liar! Write it or I'll wring your neck."

"I haven't a check book with me."

This was a facer for Jeffords, whose knowledge of banking methods was limited. He looked blank, and Lem chuckled inwardly at his perplexity.

"Can't you write it on a piece of paper?"

"I might do that. Get me a sheet of paper."

Jeffords hunted around and finally tore a flyleaf out of a book in the library. Upon it Lem drew one of the queerest checks that had ever been constructed. He misplaced the period in the arabic numerals so that it read $5.000, and then wrote out "five thousand and no one hundredths dollars "*non bon.*" Then he signed his name L. K. Toadsby. As his customary signature was Lemuel Toadsby and his middle initials was not K., it seemed to him that no sane cashier would honor this check.

The giant scrutinized the paper carefully. "What do them words mean?" he said, pointing to the two words which followed the total sum.

"It means, pay no more than this amount. You always put that after a large sum; it's just a formality."

"Hum!" grunted Jeffords. "Well, I got a way of findin' out. You come with me."

He conducted Lem to the door leading to the basement stairs, unlocked it and shouted:

"You boes can come up now."

The pair had retired to the kitchen, but they came tumbling up the stairs.

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"Did you get the money?" demanded the one that his partner called Bill.

"He says he'll get it for us. You two watch this feller and don't stand for any tricks. I got to go upstairs a minute."

The pair pushed Lem into the library, occupied seats, and glowered at him. The lawyer studied them covertly, wondering what sort of arguments he might use to bring them over to his side.

Meanwhile, Jeffords stumped up the stairs and entered the bedroom which had been Jack's but which he had preëmpted since last night. Lying on the bed, neatly trussed up, was Jack Flanders. Jeffords had decided to lay him aside where he would be safe while he attended to business.

"Say, feller," asked Jeffords—"you're an educated guy—you know about banks and checks and things like that, don't you?"

"Not as much as I should wish," replied Flanders, looking up at him with amusement.

"Do me a favor, will yer?"

"Now, old man, you can't expect me to do favors for you when you treat me like this."

"I suppose not," replied Jeffords. "I'll take the ropes off."

He untied Jack quickly, and the young man got up off the bed.

"Just give this a squint and see if it's all right."

He passed over the remarkable document just signed by Toadsby, which Jack read with increasing astonishment.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"Off of him."

"Did you use force?"

"'Tain't none of your business."

"I've got to know the facts before I can tell you anything."

"Well," grinned Jeffords, "I sent the boys out to find him and bring him here on a stall. Told him there was a wounded yegg that needed a lawyer, hidin' in this house. See? So he walks into the trap, then I collars him and choke this check out of him. Pretty good, hey?"

"Do you expect to present it to the bank yourself?"

"Sure; there ain't nobody else I can trust, unless maybe you'd take it."

"Did you let Toadsby go after you got this document out of him?"

"Naw. Think I'm a chump? I know about stoppin' checks. I keep him right under this roof until I get the cash."

Jack considered a moment. He owed nothing to Toadsby. To embroil the lawyer with his former tool might have excellent results upon his own future.

"Anybody who offered this check at the bank would probably be arrested," he said.

"What?" bellowed Jeffords. "What's wrong with it?"

"Everything. In this place it says pay you five dollars, here it says five thousand; that makes the amount doubtful. The signature is probably wrong—I never heard that he had a 'K' in his name. And these two words, '*Non bon,*' are mongrel Latin meaning 'No good,' a warning to the bank not to pay the check."

"Wow!" exclaimed Jeffords. "The dirty little rat!"

In two strides he was through the door, and apparently slipped on the top step and slid the rest of the way, judging by the sound. As he had left the door open, Jack followed him out into the hallway, went halfway down the stairs, and listened. From the library was coming a dreadful noise. Apparently Jeffords was beating the rugs with Toadsby as a weapon. He heard exclamations of pain and anguish from Lem and every now and then Jeffords howled:

"Bum check, hey! I'll bum check you!"

At the end of five minutes the castigation stopped because one of the tramps grasped Jeffords's arm and exclaimed:

"Don't kill him, friend. He ain't no good dead."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MAN WITH THE GUN.

JEFFORDS dropped Lem upon the floor, where he lay completely out. His clothes were torn, both his eyes were blacked, his lips were bleeding profusely and one of his ears was swelling.

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Jack was able to look into the room from the foot of the stairs. He was almost sorry for Toadsby, who had received a frightful beating. For once his forked tongue had not drawn him out of trouble.

"Take this weasel upstairs and lock him in my bedroom," commanded Jeffords. "I will be up and have another talk with him when he comes to."

In the general confusion Jack might have opened the front door and made his escape. He thought of it, but it seemed to him that the drama being enacted under the roof was of terrific importance to him; before Jeffords and Toadsby parted something might happen that would put everything right. So he scurried up the stairs and was back in the bedroom by the time the lieutenants of Jeffords had arrived with their burden.

They threw Lem upon the bed and one of them scowled at Jack.

"Thought you was tied up," he growled.

"The big fellow let me up. I told him about the bum check."

"Well, fix up this feller; wash the blood off of him," commanded the tramp, who then exited with his friend and turned the key in the door on the outside.

Lem was moaning faintly and twisting his head from left to right. Jack stepped into the bathroom, wet a towel, returned, and wiped off the man's face. In a moment his eyes opened and he looked up into the countenance of his enemy, Jack Flanders.

"Mr. Flanders!" he murmured in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm trying to bring you to," replied Jack with a grim smile.

Lem struggled to his elbow, while his keen brain endeavored to comprehend the situation. If there were two men in the world whom it was his business to keep apart, it was Jack Flanders and Martin Jeffords.

Flanders was the only living person who had seen Jeffords in the room with Munroe. He was in danger of being punished for Jeffords's crime. How did it happen that he seemed to be on friendly terms with Jeffords, and was he in the conspiracy to draw Toadsby to the empty house?

Whatever else was wrong with Lem, he was not lacking in intelligence. Here was an astounding situation. Was the association of these two men for the purpose of injuring Toadsby? Undoubtedly. It must have been Flanders who had concocted the scheme to lure Lem to the house—Jeffords was too stupid. And Jeffords had gone upstairs with the check. He had shown it to Flanders, who had informed him that it was worthless. That was why the giant had burst into the library foaming with rage and half killed Lem. He owed this beating to Flanders, and it was another score to be paid sooner or later.

How was it possible that Jeffords had made friends with the witness of the murder of Munroe? If Flanders hoped to persuade the man to confess his crime and the complicity of Toadsby, it was ridiculous, because Jeffords was not fool enough to commit suicide. Flanders was supposed to have left town a week ago. Had he brought Jeffords back upon this blackmailing scheme to prove a connection between him and Toadsby? Were these two alleged tramps, who had assisted Jeffords, emissaries of the Sturgis-Flanders crowd? In that case he was in a very serious situation.

"Everybody supposed you were out of town on a business trip," he said finally, with a grateful smile. "It's good of you to help me like this. Are you in the hands of these criminals also?"

Whatever Flanders knew or suspected about Toadsby, Lem was determined to act as though he did not know that Jack had been spying upon Munroe with the hope of getting evidence against himself. In that case he would not know that Jack was in danger of being identified as Farlow, the man accused of the murder, nor that Stone had advised him to leave Dudley before he was compelled to stand trial. He would treat him as a fellow member of the bar whose convictions compelled him to oppose Lem for district attorney, but toward whom Toadsby felt only admiration and esteem.

Much of what was passing through Lem's mind Jack divined, and he had decided to play the game Toadsby's way for awhile to see what would happen.

"I'm in the same fix that you are," he declared. "I came here to work on a brief.

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This house belongs to Mr. Sturgis, you know. Last night three tramps broke in through a back window, overpowered me, and tied me up. The big fellow, who seems to be the best natured of the three, took the ropes off my body only half an hour ago. See the ropes?" He pointed to the pile of rope lying beside the bed. "Your presence here is a great surprise to me."

"This is a blackmailing scheme, so far as I am concerned," said Lem. "As my life is an open book, I fear no crooks of any sort whatsoever. I refused to give this man money, and as a result I was lured here to-night under pretense of visiting a prospective client who was ill. Now they are demanding five thousand dollars for my release."

"They are stupid criminals," said Jack. "Let's open that window and shout for the police. Imagine shutting two prisoners up in the second floor of a house, the windows of which are not barred, and leaving them without guards."

He looked hard at Lem, and the politician returned the gaze. It was a curious situation; neither man was sure that he could afford to obtain liberty in that way. Lem did not wish to be rescued in company with Flanders, who knew he had business relations with the man he had seen slay Munroe.

Flanders was supporting his opponent; he would be sure to make capital of the affair for Sturgis. He did not want Jeffords arrested with his confederates; they had talked of the Munroe affair in the room below. Perhaps Flanders had been listening. Jeffords might have been rash enough to tell his pals why he thought he could get money from Toadsby.

Much as he hated to part with his money, he thought he would prefer to make a compromise with Jeffords. Surely the fellow would take twenty-five hundred dollars in real money, perhaps even less. Then Lem could walk out of the house, after informing Jeffords, in case he didn't know it, that Flanders was the man who had seen him kill Munroe. If he knew anything about Jeffords, he would not allow the only witness to the crime to live long.

However, the prisoners were given no time to explain why neither wished to call in the police, for Jeffords stalked into the room, followed by his companions.

"Put the ropes on that feller again," he ordered. "Then take him out of here. Stick him in the attic. Now, counselor, I kind o' lost my temper downstairs, but you wasn't playin' fair with me. I guess I didn't break any bones and I've got beat up worse in the prize ring lots of times and never felt it next day."

"Do you know who that man is whom your friends have just taken out of this room?" demanded Lem.

"Oh, he's a poor guy that was hidin' here when we busted in. He's in wrong, and when we blow we'll just turn him loose. It was him wised me up about that bum check you give me. That was a dirty trick."

"So it was he!" said Lem vindictively. "Now suppose I tell you who he really is? He was living in the back room in the house on Cedar Street, and he saw you kill Munroe. What do you think of that?"

"Holy gee!" exclaimed Jeffords. "You know, I thought there was something familiar 'bout him. Course I didn't get a good look at the guy I busted on the jaw when I made my get-away. So this is him?"

"This is the man who can send you to the chair."

"Farlow, hey? I read about him in the papers. The police say he did it. They pay no attention to his story that there was a man in the room when he come in. They got a good case against him."

Lem watched his mind work with the contempt of a mouse for an elephant.

"S'pose he knows me?"

"Of course, he knew you instantly. That is why he is here, spying on you."

"Yeh? Well, he can't do nothin' to me. Nobody believes him. He's been hidin' out since the killin'. The poor skate!"

"What are you going to do about it?" Lem asked eagerly. In his present mood he felt that the slaughter of Flanders by Jeffords would give him great satisfaction.

"Well," said Jeffords, "that's an idea. I might bump him off and leave the body here with you, while me and the boys beat it. Then when the cops come you can explain that you didn't kill him. A cop saw you comin' into this house an hour ago.

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Don't you think you better come through with a good check, counselor?"

"No," exclaimed Lem; "you get no money from me, except what I told you—a hundred dollars!"

"Lem Toadsby," said the giant slowly, "you're a mean bird and a wise one, but the mistake you make is thinkin' nobody else knows nothin'. Now, I'm a rough guy without any education, and I never got a square deal from the time I was a shaver. But I got sense enough to know how to deal with a rat when I got my foot on his neck.

"Bumpin' off that Munroe was worth more'n a thousand dollars to you. You was scared stiff the night you come to me, and if I had any sense I'd have made you give me five grand. I'd ha' got it just as easy.

"I was a free man with nothin' on my conscience and no charge against me at headquarters; and for a measly thousand dollars I have to blow my home town and go to the chair, maybe, if they ever find out about this Munroe business. You done this to me, and I either get the money out of you or I get your gizzard."

"All I have in the bank is twenty-five hundred dollars in cash. I'll give you a good check for it. I'll see that it is cashed all right in the morning, but you must agree to get out of town for good this time and take this fellow Farlow, or Flanders, which is his real name, with you. I don't care what you do with him. If anybody had on me what he's got on you, I'd do something."

"Well," said Jeffords, "if that's all the money you got, it 'll do. Bill found some real checks in the clothes belonging to this Farlow, that he's wearin', and you make this one out with no funny business."

Groaning, partly from bodily pain and partly from mental grief at signing a big check, Lem got off the bed, went over to a table, and wrote out a check for twenty-five hundred dollars, which he handed to his captor. He had made no attempt this time to deceive. He felt that Jeffords would go as soon as he got the cash, take Flanders with him, and the body of his enemy would be found in some lonely spot in the outskirts with a knife wound in the back.

If the dead Farlow were discovered it would close up the Cedar Street affair for good and all; there would be no trial to drag in dangerous evidence of any sort, and, best of all, Lem Toadsby would have had nothing to do with his assassination.

"Just hand me that check," said a hard, cold voice.

With an oath, Jeffords swung around, while Lem Toadsby uttered a croak of surprise and dismay and dropped into a chair.

"Who the deuce are you?" rumbled Jeffords.

"Throw the check on the floor and both of you back up against the wall!" commanded the newcomer, who pointed a dangerous looking automatic at the pair.

"Mr. Everett!" exclaimed Lem Toadsby with an air of delight and gratitude. "Thank God you have come. I don't know how you got into this terrible house, but you are in time to save me. This man threatened to murder me if I didn't pay him twenty-five hundred dollars."

"Too bad he didn't murder you," remarked Fred Everett coldly. "I was listening at the door for the past five minutes and I heard your charming conversation. Now get over there alongside of him, or I'll drill you with great pleasure."

"This is a misunderstanding," pleaded Lem, rubbing his hands together in his distress, and assuming his most humble manner. "You did not hear correctly. I was just trying to placate this person."

"Back up against the wall and put your hands over your head."

The two men obeyed orders. Lem was as white as a sheet. If Everett had heard the conversation, coupled with what Flanders knew, he was utterly ruined. Jeffords, who took things as they came, wore his usual sullen, defiant manner.

CHAPTER XXII.

THREE TRUSSED FOWLS.

FRED EVERETT had arrived at Lucas Street an hour or so earlier with the intention of dropping in on his cloistered chum. He had walked down Lucas Street and was within three or four doors

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of the house when he saw three men turn up the steps and at the same moment heard a passing policeman say: "Good evening, Mr. Toadsby."

His alarm at seeing Toadsby and two companions enter the house which was supposed to be vacant, and in which Jack Flanders was hiding, can readily be imagined.

His assumption was that Toadsby had got wind of the hiding place and had come with two detectives to drag Jack off to jail. He was aware that Stone did not wish Jack in durance, for obvious reasons, but Lem might have permitted his vindictiveness to overcome his judgment. Fred did not carry firearms as a general rule, although he had a permit to do so, but in his visits to the deserted house he had formed the habit of slipping an automatic into his hip pocket; the district was none too savory.

At all hazards Jack must not be arrested, therefore he was glad that he was armed. He slipped into a doorway across the street and waited for the three to come out with their prisoner. Not a glimmer of light showed in the house; all shutters, blinds and curtains drawn. Every minute seemed interminable, but at the end of half an hour no one had emerged from the dark building. It was time to investigate.

Fred had a key to the front door, so he boldly walked up the steps, inserted the key in the lock, and stepped into the black hallway.

The ground floor rooms were dark, but he heard voices from the second floor; accordingly he tiptoed up the stairs, saw a light streaming through a partly opened door, and approached it with great caution. The conversation which he heard during the next two or three minutes enthralled him. Jeffords and Toadsby, the murderer and his master, were quarrelling, the tool was now the dictator. He could not see the third man, nor was there any sign of Jack; perhaps they were all in the room. At the moment of the passing of the check, he determined to make his entrance and secure it as documentary evidence.

His back was toward the open door as he faced the two rogues with a steady weapon, but a sudden expression of hope on the face of Toadsby and a slight sound behind him caused him to look around. Too late. A blackjack in the skillful hand of "Bill, the Bo" descended with a thud on his head and he crumpled down and lay flat, and without consciousness, upon the carpet.

"Good work, Bill!" said Jeffords approvingly. "I never seen it done better. Did this feller have anybody with him?"

"Naw," replied Bill. "I just finished packin' the caretaker away in an attic on the top floor when I see this baby listenin' at the door as I was startin' down the stairs. At first I thought it was Texas, my pal, and I pulled off my shoes to sneak down and get an earful myself, but just then the bozo walks into the room and stands you guys up. So I done my stuff."

With this he stooped over, picked up Fred's gun and put it in his own pocket. Then, with the speed of long practice he went through his pockets and removed his watch, money and other trinkets, which he also tucked away on his own person.

Lem was as weak as a cat that has just lost eight lives. Stumbling toward a chair he fell into it and rested his head on his hands.

"Who is he?" demanded Jeffords of the lawyer, stumping across the room as he spoke, turning Fred over with the toe of his boot, none too gently. "A dick? Did you have a bull on your trail when you started here?"

"He's a lawyer named Everett," explained Lem, still trembling from the shock of being on the wrong end of a gun, and even more alarmed at the fact that Fred as well as Flanders now had evidence that he and Jeffords were mixed up in the Munroe murder. "He is in partnership with Flanders, the man you have here as a prisoner."

"How'd he get in?"

"He had a key to the front door," said Bill producing it from among the loot in Fred's pockets.

"Well," pronounced Jeffords deliberately, "tie this one up, too. We'll run out of clothesline if they keep coming. And as for you, Mr. Toadsby I heard how you tried to square yourself with him, pretendin' to

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be an innocent kidnaped party. I've a good mind to give you another lickin'."

"Remember I'm a prominent man in this town," protested Lem. "I couldn't let this fellow think I was consorting with tramps and criminals."

"Is that so? Well, we'll tie you up with the other two, just so you don't sneak out on us and stop payment on that check. You and Texas take these two fellers and lock 'em in the attic with the other one. Then it'll only take one man to watch them. We got to take turns stayin' awake tonight."

"Well, do less orderin' and give us more help," said Bill. "Call Texas before he drinks up all the liquor. This dicky bird is comin' to."

Fred Everett was recovering rapidly from the blow on the back of the head. His legs began to kick out, his arms moved and his eyes opened. He stared stupidly around, then his glance fell on Toadsby who regarded him viciously.

"I seem to have been put out of business," observed Everett with a rueful smile as he felt of the bump on his head. "There are more of you crooks than I expected."

"Kindly do not call me a crook, Mr. Everett," retorted Lem, who struggled to the end to keep up appearances. "I am a fellow victim."

Texas came in at this instant with a coil of rope, gazed at Fred in astonishment and asked.

"This is a new one. Where'd he come from?"

"Tie him up and shut your face. Then carry him up to the attic."

"Aw, say, boss. He's big. Why not make him walk up and tie him when we get him there?"

"Suit yerself. Take 'em both along."

Toadsby protested. He did not wish to be shut up in a room with his two enemies even if they were bound hand and foot. He whispered to Jeffords for a minute very earnestly and the big man gave in. "All right. Just tote that feller upstairs."

Prodded with the butt of his own pistol, Fred ascended two flights of stairs, was pushed into a back attic, and tripped deftly so that he fell to the floor. The tramp pressed the electric light button so that he could see to truss up the captive. Jack, who was lying bound on the bed, lifted his head and recognized his partner with an ejaculation of surprise.

"Hello, Jack, so this is where you are!" exclaimed Fred.

"And it's where you'll be in a minute," said the tramp sardonically as he began to wind the rope about his body.

The two friends exchanged commiserating smiles, but said nothing; it looked as though they would have plenty of time to talk later. Presently the roping operation was completed, Texas grunted with satisfaction at his handiwork, then lifted Fred easily from the floor and dropped him on the bed.

"This poor guy was here and couldn't get away, but you asked for this. You walked into it like a big boob."

With this he extinguished the light, leaving the law partners side by side in the dark.

"I'm sorry you stumbled into this mess," said Jack. "I was afraid you or Sturgis might blunder in, but there wasn't any way of warning you. I couldn't get near the telephone all day."

"Two of these fellows look like common tramps, the third one is the murderer and with them is our pious friend, Mr. Lem Toadsby."

Fred repeated the conversation he had overheard in the bedroom on the second floor. "It's enough to hang the pair of them, with your evidence of catching Jeffords in the act of killing Munroe. We've got them dead to rights!" he declared.

"You mean they have us dead to rights," corrected Jack. "You are in the tightest hole of your career, old man, and so am I. Our chances of being alive tomorrow morning are very slight."

"Don't be absurd. They wouldn't murder us!"

"Jeffords is a professional murderer."

"But Toadsby wouldn't permit it."

"If you had seen the beating he gave Toadsby tonight you wouldn't talk of Lem's permitting anything. But Lem will urge him to do it."

"Rot! Lem's a cowardly hypocrite; he wouldn't dare go in for wholesale murder."

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"Don't you see he's got to? If we escape, Toadsby will be arrested and convicted as an accessory to the murder of Munroe. Jeffords might let us go because he doesn't want to stay in Dudley, but Toadsby is going to be elected district attorney. He won't fly the town to escape soaking his hands in blood. And he won't kill us personally; he will get the yeggs to do it."

"Cheerful prospect."

"Lem is a victim of his own deeds. By nature he is a sneaking coward. He wouldn't voluntarily have risked his neck for anything in the world. He hasn't nerve enough to rob a bank or burglarize a house, but to bring about investigations into the food products of various concerns looked like easy safe graft.

"His methods were excellent. His go-between made the deals, handled the checks. Lem met him secretly and got cash. But he pinned his faith on the loyalty of Munroe and Munroe was about to betray him. Probably tried to hold him up for a large sum. To save his bank account, Lem bargained with this thug, Jeffords, to put him out of the way.

"Thus the easy, safe graft had made a murderer out of Lem, even though another hand struck the blow. And that put him in a position where he had to pay blackmail to the murderer. My bad luck caused suspicion to turn toward me, so Lem thought he could afford to defy the blackmailer.

"Jeffords sent two accomplices to Lem's house to tell him about a rich burglar who was wounded and in hiding, and the man's avarice caused him to walk into a trap. He finds me in the house, and I overhear him and Jeffords in conversation. That is bad enough.

"Then you arrive and catch an even more incriminating conversation. This puts it right up to Lem to decide whether he will be mixed up in two more killings, or abandon his career and his prospects in Dudley and become a fugitive, because that's what will happen if we escape. So this cringing, hand-rubbing Uriah Heep, afraid of his own shadow, this creeping slimy grafter, this mole, this reptile, has to cause three deaths to save himself."

"There's a moral to your tale, but I'm in no mood to consider it. I'm afraid it's all up with us."

"Now, suppose we are slaughtered; it's the work of tramps. The police will find evidence of their occupation of the house. Sturgis will admit that I was hiding here and you came to see me. Tramps killed us for what they could find on our persons. Serving us right for being in a deserted house. Sam Stone owns the police force. From his standpoint it is good riddance to both of us; we were annoying him. He permits my remains to be identified as Farlow, and pins the Munroe murder upon me. Toadsby is clean and clear, gets elected district attorney,—and—"

"And marries Mary Trafford."

"No, by God! We've got to get out of here."

"That's what I've been thinking. While you've been proving why we ought to be put out of the way I've been using my head. I'm tied very neatly, my wrists are fastened so I can't move them, but my fingers are free. This boneheaded tramp knows how to tie a man up, but he shouldn't put two men who are tied up side by side. If we can bump around until my fingers come in contact with one of your knots, maybe I can untie you and you can unfasten my bonds."

So the partners twisted and turned in the dark in the hope of bringing their knots within reach of the fingers of either. It was a curiously difficult job, even to locate the ropes' ends. If they had been in the hands of intelligent criminals they would have been bound to chairs on opposite sides of the room; it was their good fortune that their captors were brutal and violent tramps lacking in gray matter.

And downstairs Lem Toadsby, state senator, counselor and prospective district attorney was undergoing the humiliation of being trussed up by Martin Jeffords, the while he craftily suggested to the prize fighter that he make away with the two men in the attic.

"I can see why you want them out of the way," Jeffords told him, "but they can't do me any harm. You gave me one bum check and I don't believe this one is good till I get the money for it. I got to tie you

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up because I'm going to bed. Texas and Bill will watch those boys upstairs, but I'll keep you in my room, nicely bundled up so you can't get away.

"I've done all the killin' I'm goin' to, for other people anyway. But if you don't double cross me, I'll give you that Everett's automatic tomorrow, and you can go upstairs and do your own murderin'!"

"I couldn't kill anybody," faltered Lem.

"Then let 'em live. We'll leave them here when we make our get-away to-morrow night and maybe they'll starve to death anyway. Now I'm goin' to tie you in this nice arm chair so you can get some sleep, and I'm going to have a few drinks and turn in."

As Lem sat alone in the chamber while the big man went down to the basement to get his bottle, his brain was busy. His thoughts were remarkably like what Jack had surmised they must be; the frightful danger which he ran with two men alive who knew the full extent of his iniquity.

Lawyers like Toadsby have no respect for the law, they learn it to evade it. His successes at the bar had consisted of taking advantage of technicalities to free criminals. Despite his oath to defend only the innocent, he had secured the release of many men whom he knew to be guilty and had taken as his fee part of their loot. There are many such lawyers. But he never wished to be an active criminal; through an accumulation of circumstances he found himself responsible for one murder and compelled to bring about two others to cover his tracks, and what troubled him most, just now, was the fear that Jeffords might be so soft-hearted as to fail to eliminate the firm of Flanders and Everett.

Presently Jeffords returned with a bottle. He had already taken two or three drinks; he offered to hold a glass of the stuff to Lem's mouth, but the lawyer refused. Whereupon he poured nearly a tumbler full and began to prepare for bed, his preparations consisting only of removing his coat and shoes. Then he turned out the light, tumbled upon the bed and was snoring in five or ten minutes.

Lem had not been subjected to the indignity of a search. He had no weapons, but his money had been left in his pocket.

On one end of his watch chain hung a small gold penknife with a good little steel blade. Lem began to work his arms and hands to loosen his bonds so that he could reach the knife. As Jeffords had not wished to hurt him, he had not drawn the ropes very tight, and in the course of ten or fifteen minutes he was able to twine one of his fingers in the watch chain and pull. The little knife fell out. Opening it with one hand was difficult, but finally he succeeded in twisting his hand so that he cut the rope around his wrist.

Half an hour after Jeffords went to sleep, Toadsby was free. He crept to the bed, found the big man's coat, fumbled in the pockets until he had his fingers on the check for twenty-five hundred dollars. He also found a big clasp knife. Should he bury the knife in Jeffords's chest as the latter had treated Munroe? He slowly opened the knife, bent over the sleeper. No, Lem was not that kind of an assassin. He had to dispose of Flanders and Everett, but Jeffords was not so dangerous. And the man might awake and overpower him.

He crept out of the room and up the stairs. From the third floor landing he could see the tramp, Texas, sitting in a chair outside the attic door with a glass of whisky on a chair beside him, and a cigar in his mouth. Lem could not pass that sentinel, although he seemed to be asleep.

He tiptoed down to the street floor, laid his hand on the knob of the front door, and then he had an inspiration.

He went down to the basement, came back with an armful of papers, old rags, and some kindlings which had been reposing behind the kitchen stove. He made a second trip and a third. He piled the stuff up in the hallway at the foot of the stairs.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CONFLAGRATION.

TOADSBY lighted a match and touched it to the pile of inflammables in half a dozen places. The man who could not kill another with cold steel was able to set fire to a house in the hope of burning up its inmates.

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There were no back stairs, exit must be by one staircase, the bottom of which was a mass of flames in two or three minutes. Lem watched to make sure his funeral pyre was burning properly, then he scuttled down the basement stairs and out through the kitchen window by which the tramps had made their entrance the day before.

From Lem's standpoint the destruction of all the inmates of the house would be eminently desirable. His own record would be purified by fire. It was possible that the tramps might escape by jumping out of windows, but the prisoners in the attic held fast by their bonds would inevitably perish. That the house was in a block, that the fire might cause the death of innocent people in other houses did not concern Toadsby. He went out a back gate, crossed a field, went down a rear street and then came around by the foot of Lucus Street to look upon his handiwork. By this time smoke was pouring from the windows, there was the flickering crimson tinge to the smoke which proved that a brisk fire was burning within.

Clang, clang came the bells of the engines. They were approaching from all directions. The crowd which comes to a fire at any hour of the day or night was collecting rapidly. Lem mingled with the crowd which was pushed back down the block by the police who had reached the scene. The fire apparatus began to function. Ladders were placed upon the building, there was the crackle of breaking glass, the loud hiss of the hose stream as it met the fire.

"It's a vacant house," he heard somebody say. Lucky nobody is sleeping there, because the place is a furnace."

And then Lem became ill, so ill that he crawled away from the scene.

His knees wabbled, his stomach contracted, upon his brow an icy sweat appeared; hardly could he push one foot ahead of the other, but in time he reached a taxicab which was drawn up so that the driver could watch the fire. Yielding to the slogan of "business before pleasure," the driver took him to his home. Toadsby fainted in the cab, but recovered before the car drew up at his door.

Granting that Toadsby was a vile creature, a cold-blooded reptilian thing which cared for nothing save itself, he was not experienced in capital crimes, he was not made of the stuff which enabled Nero to toast Christians at a garden party or to play the fiddle while Rome burned.

To-morrow or the next day, if he had evaded all suspicion he might be able to congratulate himself that he had removed his enemies and had nothing further to fear in the city of Dudley save the terrible Sam Stone. To-night he trembled at the thought that he had caused men to be burned to death, and he would have trembled more if he thought they had escaped.

In his rooms he paced the floor in a frenzy of fright and suspense. And he was very sorry for himself. Why should Lem Toadsby, a peaceable man, who only asked to be let alone, have been compelled to indulge in deeds of violence? Could not these men have attended to their own affairs instead of intruding into his business and compelling him to protect himself. It was in a way their own fault that Flanders and Everett had come to a terrible end; any man placed in his frightful position might have been driven to do as he had done.

The uncertainty and suspense preyed upon him; he must know what had happened at the fire, if all the inmates had lost their lives, if any had escaped. At the end of an hour and a half he called police headquarters, gave his name, and asked whether the big fire had been extinguished.

"All out, Mr. Toadsby."

"Where was the fire, may I ask?"

"A dwelling house on Lucus Street. Total loss."

Lem passed his tongue across his dry lips. "Were there—were there any lives lost?"

"Found two bodies in the ruins."

"How dreadful! Have they been identified?"

"Bodies burned beyond recognition, but we found a metal cardcase on one body with a couple of cards in it reading John Flanders, 87 Pierpont Street. Know him?"

Lem was shaking like a man with palsy, but the businesslike police lieutenant could not see him.

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"I—I think so," he stammered. "I tried a case against him. A very fine young man."

"What we can't make out," added the headquarters man, "is what he was doing there. The house was supposed to be vacant."

"I'm afraid I can't help you. I am much obliged for your information."

Toadsby hung up, groped for a chair, and fell into it. He was experiencing another reaction. Flanders was dead, so much, but who had escaped? He knew that Everett had been locked in the same room, undoubtedly his was the second body. And the three tramps must have made their escape. If so they were well out of the city by now, for they knew that they would be accused of setting the fire.

And then Toadsby began to feel triumphant. His apprehension and his partial contrition left him. He had done this thing. Lem Toadsby had brushed away these obstructions from his path. Like the great men of history he was bound upward, and woe to those who opposed him. Munroe had threatened him—he was gone, Flanders and Everett might have ruined him, they had been incinerated. Sam Stone alone stood between him and perfect security—let him beware. This thin, pale, unpleasant looking man sitting in that chair with his black eyes burning feverishly, his thin lips tightly pressed, and his narrow chin thrust forward, would have inspired fear to a spectator. Perhaps the young Napoleon looked like that the night in Paris when he placed his artillery in position to mow down his fellow citizens if they dared to oppose the new regime.

Toadsby saw a wide smooth road ahead of him to the Governor's mansion. There was no limit to his future. With his newfound power he would tread upon Sam Stone and force his support or eliminate him and take over the political organization of the city and the State himself. Nothing could stop him. As district attorney he would make such a record in hunting down and punishing evil doers that the eyes of the whole nation would be focused on him. Whom the Gods would destroy they first make mad. Toadsby was mad that night.

Dawn was breaking when he recovered his normal frame of mind sufficiently to prepare for bed, and then he did not sleep for a long time.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SAVING BONDS.

FLANDERS and Everett fumbled in the dark in the attic of the house on Lucus Street, perseveringly and painstakingly trying to locate the knots which bound them. But after many minutes of painful twisting and edging about, pushing up the body with the feet, pulling it slowly back again, the fingers of Jack Flanders touched a big knot just above the knees of his friend. It is hard enough to untie a knot when you can see it and when the hands and arms are free, but much more when it is impossible to bring wrist pressure to the aid of the hands.

It must have been ten minutes after he located the knot before Jack had it unfastened, and it took some time longer to free Everett completely. Then Fred sprang from the bed, found the light switch and illuminated the room. At the same moment he sniffed suspiciously, and he saw a thin wreath of smoke oozing in under the door.

"Smoke," he exclaimed. "Do you suppose these tramps have set the house on fire? I'll have you loose in a minute."

He bent over Jack and fumbled with his bonds, the knot was hard to loosen, the smoke grew thicker.

A fist beat on the door.

"Hey! Open the door," called the sentry who had been sitting outside. "The joint is on fire."

"We can't; it's locked on the outside and we're tied up," called Fred as his fingers finally mastered the knot.

"Beat it downstairs, Texas; there ain't any fire escapes on this house," called Bill, who had been sleeping, apparently in the front attic. They heard the men go thumping down the stairs, and they heard also a roaring sound, mingled with a snapping and crackling, which indicated that the fire, somewhere below, had gained great headway.

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The heat in the room was already intense, and it was half full of choking smoke, smoke from burning cloth, of which a large quantity had been included in Lem's bonfire material.

Jack now sprang to his feet, threshed his arms to restore circulation, and looked with a white face at his friend.

"Locked in," he exclaimed. "The swine didn't even give us a chance for our lives. We are trapped."

"You predicted we wouldn't live till morning, but I didn't think we would end this way. This smoke is awful."

"Can we jump out the window?"

"It's a good thirty-five feet to the ground. We'll be killed."

"The ropes," screamed Fred. "Quick, tie them together. They'll go half or two-thirds of the way."

Lem had supposed that the pair, tied hand and foot, would be completely helpless in their attic; it was their bonds which saved them. The ropes tied together were twenty-five feet long. They quickly fastened them to the closet door, threw them out, then Fred lowered himself from the window.

The opening of the window caused smoke from the furnace outside the door to fill the room completely. Jack took off his coat and wrapped it around his face as he waited to give his friend a chance to get to the bottom. He was afraid that the quarter-inch clothes line would not support them both.

A dense cloud of black smoke enveloped him as he stood in the open window. It seemed an hour; it was probably not two minutes before Fred called from the ground,

"Come on, Jack."

Then he swung out and lowered himself carefully, finally dropping less than ten feet. He fell over and his friend picked him up.

"Let's get out of this!" he said, and they ran out of the back gate, across the vacant lot at the rear, following the course taken by the firebug shortly before.

The shouting of the crowd in front of the house, the commands of the firemen, the rattle and rumble of arriving apparatus, the tooting of sirens and the honking of horns had drawn the eyes of all the inhabitants of the block to the front of the burning house. No one observed the escape.

The house was of wooden construction, with a thin facing of brick front and rear. In less than twenty minutes from the commencement of the fire the floors and roof fell in. Fortunately the firemen were able to prevent it from communicating to the houses on left and right; brick walls saved them.

Fred and Jack were unable to leave the vicinity. Like Lem, they came around the end of Lucus Street and mingled with the huge crowd which watched the fire. It happened that they stood in the multitude not fifty feet from where the cause of the holocaust was stationed, but as their eyes were fixed in horrid fascination upon the burning house they did not see him.

When the roof fell in Jack silently extended his hand and they exchanged a clasp of thankfuless. Fifteen minutes more delay in unfastening their bonds and they would have been buried in the burning mass. When it was all over they went to their homes.

But the firemen continued to pour tons of water upon the ruins until all fire was extinguished and only threads of sullen smoke continued to rise.

Then they began the grimy, ghastly work of poking for bodies, and in the course of an hour they were rewarded by finding the charred remains of two men.

The partners had supposed that the tramps had escaped, but the men, both half drunk, had run down to the second floor, been overpowered by smoke and fallen. That was their end.

Martin Jeffords had been more fortunate. Awakened by the shouts of his pals, he had opened his door, saw the hall full of smoke and the crimson cloud on the stairs leading to the ground floor, slammed it shut, and rushed to a back window. For him it was a drop of only fifteen feet, and he landed shaken but uninjured.

He was only four or five minutes behind Toadsby as he ran through the vacant lot. It was characteristic of him to have given no thought to the other occupants of the house, though he had supposed Toadsby

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was lying bound in the same room as himself. When he did stop running he remembered, but only shrugged his big shoulders. It was too late to do anything. If he went back he would be accused of setting the fire. So he went down to the railroad yards and hopped a slow freight which was just getting under way.

Back in his own apartment Jack had time to consider the events of the past twenty-four hours. His nerves were jangling, his head was aching, he could not compose himself. He wondered what had happened to Toadsby, but he presumed that Lem had escaped with Jeffords and the others. Fred had informed him of the suggestion to tie up the senator and put him in the attic with them, but it had not happened, probably Toadsby had caved in and granted all the prize fighter's demands. He might even have left the house before the fire. Certainly if Fred and himself, trussed up at the top of the building, had succeeded in escaping the inmates of the lower part of the house must have gotten away safely.

Curiously enough only twenty-four hours ago he had been utterly bored with his inactivity. He had even been considering reading the Encyclopedia Britannica for entertainment. Just now he would like to sleep, but he knew that he could not; dull reading might compose his nerves, why not take down the Encyclopedia and burrow for awhile in the sum of human knowledge.

Smiling, he went to his bookcase, reached in, and pulled out a fat heavy volume. He lit his reading lamp, seated himself in an armchair and opened the book in the middle He paraphrased General Kearney's instructions to a colonel of a Union regiment in the Civil War:

"Go in anywhere, colonel; there's elegant fighting along the whole line."

He said with a smile, "Start anywhere. There is elegant reading along the whole line."

Then he glanced at the page and at the top he read Vol. 24, p 547. "24—547."

An amazing coincidence; that was the mysterious number whispered by the dying Ralph Munroe, a number so high that no safe deposit box in the city attained it. A number which would "get Toadsby," as Munroe had said.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE DEATH NOTICE.

FLANDERS was too practical a man to devote attention to the occult or the unknown, yet in college he had taken a course in psychology, knew something of the supposed powers of the subconscious mind. Here, he thought, was an occurrence which would have interested old Professor Jones.

Although things had been coming too fast for the past couple of days to permit him to devote much thought to the mysterious number it had never been out of his mind from the moment he heard it from the lips of the dying Munroe. Thus, when he groped for a book in the bookcase the subconscious mind had directed his hand to one volume among the thirty and caused him to open volume 24 at page 547.

It was an amazing thing for the subconscious mind to do, he thought, but what the deuce did it do it for. There was no significance whatever in the three or four articles that were spread before him. That was the trouble with the subconscious, it didn't use good sense, it was contented with tricks of this sort. Spiritualism was much the same sort of thing. A ghost would take the trouble to materialize itself for the purpose of rapping on tables, touching believers with clammy hands, hiding in cabinets, and delivering arrant nonsense in a sepulchral voice. He read for half an hour, gradually grew sleepy, and finally retired.

But the subconscious mind was not through with him. He dreamed harrowing dreams, mostly of brutal Jeffords, of treacherous Toadsby, of the smoke and the fire. He awoke once in terror, for he thought the fire had caught him as he stood at the window and was neatly toasting him. He slept again, and this time Ralph Munroe came to him. Munroe was arrayed in flowing white vestments, and his face was pale and pleading.

"Why don't you avenge me?" he de-

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manded. "Why don't you punish Toadsby? Toadsby killed me."

"How can I avenge you?" Jack thought he replied. "I can't get any proof."

"Look in the Encyclopedia," urged the spirit. "It's 24547."

"Darn it, I did and it was all about the island of Samoa. What had Toadsby to do with Samoa?"

With a groan the vision of Munroe faded, and Jack plunged into other, even more fantastic, dreams which flitted through his troubled soul, until he woke, about ten in the morning, weary despite his long sleep. His legs and arms were stiff and sore from the many hours of confinement in bonds. A bath helped him, and he was considering going out for breakfast when Fred Everett came into the apartment with a morning paper in his hands.

"It is given to few among us to experience what you are going to experience now," declared his partner with a cheerful grin. "Gaze upon this and marvel. Then look in the mirror to make sure it isn't true."

Jack took the paper and got the shock of his life up to that moment. Spread across to eight columns with a heavy black scare head which said:

Prominent Lawyer Burned to Death. John Flanders Meets Death in Lucus Street Fire. Mystery Surrounding his Presence in Deserted House.

There followed a lurid story of the fire, with an account of the finding two bodies so completely incinerated that recognition was impossible, but in the metal cardcase found under one of the bodies were two visiting cards upon which the name and address of John Flanders could be distinguished, although the cards were well browned by the heat to which they had been subjected.

Followed an obituary in which Jack's college athletic achievements were mentioned and laudatory comment upon his success at the bar in the brief time that he had been practicing. There were brief statements from two or three well known Dudleyites which expressed regret that one so young and promising had passed away. There was a particularly fulsome paragraph of tribute from Lem Toadsby, who said he had been proud to number him among his friends.

Jack felt very queer when he laid the paper down. He understood how the mistake had happened; one of the tramps who was wearing his clothes had met his death, and Jack's cardcase happened to be in the pocket of that particular suit. Still, a man does not read his own death notice every day.

"They treated me pretty well considering," he admitted. "My achievements up to the present have been zero, but they make out a good case for me. I particularly appreciate Toadsby's contribution. Won't he be furious when he finds I am still alive? I'll hurry down to the office."

"Wait a moment, old man," said Fred. "I have seen Sturgis, and he thinks it might be a good idea if you remained dead for a day or so. I've given him all our evidence against Toadsby, and we only need a few strands more to complete the rope that will hang him. A sudden shock might do the trick. Suppose we were to confront him with you he might give himself away."

"I can't do that. I've got to call up Mary Trafford. What will she think if she reads this notice?"

"She's read it already; you slept late. How strong are you with her?"

"I don't know. We were getting to be pretty good friends until I had to go into hiding."

"Let me go out to see her. I'll tip her off and ask her not to tell Toadsby. If she has been chumming around with you at all it's a cinch she isn't in love with him."

"Will you go out there right away?"

"Just as soon as I leave here."

"Has Sturgis had any luck regarding 24547?"

"No, nothing, but I don't think we are going to need it."

"I had a curious experience last night," said Jack, almost shamefaced. Then he told of opening the Encyclopedia.

"It was remarkable," said Fred thoughtfully. "The chances against you hitting that particular combination of numbers were about one in ten million."

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"Then I dreamed that I saw Munroe." He related the details of the dream.

"That isn't so remarkable. You had the experience with the Encyclopedia in your mind when you went to sleep; it was natural to connect Munroe with it. Dreams are made up of fragments of thoughts that we have while we are awake, distorted and fantastic, but having a basis of sense. Wait a minute."

He grasped the telephone and called his office. When the stenographer came on the line he asked,

"In that collection of books I bought at the Munroe auction was there an Encyclopedia Britannica?"

"Who's loony now?" demanded Jack with a laugh.

The stenographer was talking and Fred waved for silence from Jack with his hand.

"There are nothing but law books among those I have already unpacked, but the boy is opening the last case of books." There was a pause. "Yes," she said. "There is an Encyclopedia Britannica, calf bound, eleventh edition."

"Don't unpack it. Leave it in the box."

He faced his partner. "If the spirit world is kind enough to give us assistance in getting the goods on Toadsby I'm not going to turn it down. I told you I had bought Munroe's library. If he had any incriminating document to hide and was afraid his safe would be robbed or a safety deposit box be opened he might have slipped it into one of those big volumes at that page. I read in a novel how a will was hidden in a book in a library of a British manor house and wasn't read for a hundred years later, which shows how literary that family happened to be.

"I'm not a religious man, but I think there is a lot going on in this world that humans do not comprehend, and your opening that volume at that page meant something. What luck that we bought Munroe's books!"

"But my dear Fred, this is only a hunch. In all probability you'll find no more in that encyclopedia than I found in mine."

"Maybe, but something compelled me to buy those books; it was a bit of extravagance, for we could not really afford it. And something forced you to open your volume at that page. And certainly a kindly spirit enabled us to escape from that house last night.

"I suppose a kindly devil got Toadsby out; he seems to have escaped all right. I've been thinking that perhaps he set it."

"Ridiculous! He wouldn't have the nerve. Now I'm going directly to Everton to break the good news to your young lady. I only met her once, but I think she'll be polite enough to see me. Will you let me stop at the office and look up that book. It won't take five minutes?"

"Go to it. Meantime I'll lay low, refuse to answer telephone or doorbell. You are my executor, so nobody else has a right to enter."

Fred departed, while Jack picked up the newspaper and read for the second time how he had lost his life amidst flames the night before.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TOADSBY CARRIES ON.

LEM TOADSBY had not authorized the paragraph of eulogy in the newspaper. It had been built up by the police headquarters reporter from the sentence of Lem's to the night lieutenant when he had been informed over the phone of the tragedy and the identification; nevertheless, he was pleased when he read it in the morning paper. Of the dead say nothing but good, as the Latin proverb has it.

He was a bit shaken in the morning, as was natural, and he dreaded showing himself, for a man with the heavy load of guilt which he carried could not free himself from fear no matter how rosy seemed his prospects of escape from any punishment. Things were normal at his office. About eleven Sam Stone's secretary got him on the line and Stone came on to say:

"Best thing that could have happened. Now forget it and carry on."

"I'll make the best speech of my career at the rally to-morrow night," retorted Lem.

"Don't be too damn meek. You can overdo that stuff."

He called Mrs. Scott a little later and

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asked if he might come out to Everton that night and speak to Mary upon an important matter.

"Oh, my dear Mr. Toadsby," exclaimed Mary's aunt, "the most frightful thing has happened. Mary read about Mr. Flanders's death and went into hysterics. She carried on something dreadful, and she told me she loved the fellow, would never marry anybody else, and wanted to die. She is in her room now crying as though her poor little heart would break. Whatever am I to do?"

"Oh, er—well," stammered Lem, "have you sent for a doctor?"

"A doctor can do nothing in a case like this."

"Do you suppose, if I came out, I could soothe her?"

"I think it would be a mistake to-day."

"Please tell her how sorry I am, and call her attention to a paragraph of mine eulogizing the late John Flanders in to-day's papers."

"I shall, I shall."

Lem hung up rather disturbed. He had feared that Mary was becoming interested in Flanders, but he thought that her aunt and himself could influence a girl so pliable and obedient into consenting to an engagement to himself. This would have the result of causing his engagement to be put off for some time. However, Flanders was out of the way.

Late in the afternoon a messenger came into Toadsby's office with a note from Sturgis. The opposition candidate asked the privilege of appearing on the platform at the Toadsby rally the following night and asking a few questions. Lem smiled sarcastically as he read the note.

"He can't get anybody to turn out for his own rally and he wants to talk to a crowd for once during this campaign. It's pie for me."

So he graciously granted the request and sent out a statement to the newspapers that he had invited Sturgis to appear upon the same stage with him, in fact challenged him to offer any good reason why Toadsby should not be elected district attorney.

That evening he ventured to call at the Scott home in Everton to pay his respects, as he said, and to learn if Miss Trafford were better. He found Jim Scott taking his after dinner coffee with his step-mother, both in good spirits. Mrs. Scott greeted Lem effusively as always, urged him to have some dinner, or, at least, take coffee with them.

"And how is Miss Mary? I was greatly distressed at what you told me."

"Naturally, you would be," said Mrs. Scott. "It was a terrific shock to me to find that Mary was interested in this young man, for I supposed she thought only of you."

"Poor Flanders was handsome and dashing," sighed Lem. "I am just an ordinary sort of individual, not in the least romantic. I am sure I do not blame her."

"This was a terrible shock to me," said Jim Scott. "I loved Jack like a brother at college, and, though I have been too busy to see as much of him as I should have wished since he came back to Dudley, I am suffering as much as though he were my own brother. He did me a tremendous service once; I never had a chance to repay him."

"It was a shock to me, too," said Toadsby. "Even though he was fighting me in this election, I liked and admired him."

"Does anybody know what he was doing in that house? It belonged to Sturgis, I understand."

"Whatever he was doing, it was something strictly honorable," asserted Lem stoutly.

"Your attitude gives you great credit," said Mrs. Scott. "You will be glad to know that Mary is much better. Mr. Everett came out to see her, and after he had talked with her for a few minutes she perked up wonderfully."

"Everett!" exclaimed Toadsby, astonished and frightened.

So sure had he been that Fred's was the second unidentified body that he had made no inquiries about him during the day. "What could he have to say to Mary?"

"He was his partner, you know. I presume Mr. Flanders confided in him some of the details of this mysterious acquaintance which went on under my nose without my knowing it," asserted Mrs. Scott.

"Well, I have a number of things to do,

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and just dropped in for a moment," stammered Lem. "I've got to be going now."

He took himself off, greatly shaken. What did it mean? How had Everett escaped? Had he abandoned his friend to save himself? As Toadsby would not have hesitated to do just that thing, it did not seem impossible that Fred had left his partner in the lurch.

Jack's identification was positive, of course. The card case was sufficient—no one else would be carrying his card case. But if Everett was at large, then Toadsby was not as safe as he had supposed. Toadsby had been caught dickering with Jeffords in a room in the house on Lucus Street by Everett, who had overheard an incriminating conversation. But if Everett were not dead, perhaps Jeffords's was the second body. In that case any unsupported charge by Everett would have no weight, except to prove that Lem had been in the house on Lucus Street early in the evening—something that he did not wish to be made public.

It was a greatly worried candidate who worked on his big speech at his home that night. Had he known that Everett were alive he would not have agreed so readily to the admission of Sturgis to his rally. Well, he would deliver an oration that would sweep the crowd off its feet, and he would see that the rally was packed so that Sturgis could get no hearing.

Packing a rally is an old political trick. It consists in filling a hall very early with partisans and preventing persons not in sympathy with the speakers and their party from getting entrance. Sometimes it is done by the party opposed to the organization putting on the meeting, in which case the ward heelers and their followers prevent those in sympathy with the rally from getting in.

Early next day Lem sent out word to pack the rally, but the call did not awaken much enthusiasm. The regulars were apathetic because the election was a foregone conclusion; they did not take the call seriously and failed to turn out in overwhelming numbers. Meantime the reformers worked earnestly, all day, persuading their adherents to put in an early appearance, and the result, at eight o'clock, was that the hall, which seated only a thousand, contained nearly as many Sturgis men as supporters of Lem Toadsby.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE APPARITION.

SAM STONE never attended political meetings. They bored him, and he preferred to rule from a private room. A local clergyman presided for Toadsby, while Mrs. Scott and two other representatives of the women's clubs occupied seats on the platform. Three or four representatives of Liberty Hall and Independence Hall also sat behind the speaker looking starched and uncomfortable but feeling immensely important.

Two speakers preceded Toadsby, and informed the audience of his many qualities, not the least of which were his modesty and his zeal for the lowly.

The audience was enthusiastic, even the Sturgis supporters applauding politely. In time the candidate appeared and then the welkin rang.

The applause lasted four or five minutes, during which time Lem stood in an attitude of laughing embarrassment. In the end he was allowed to speak. It was a good speech, in his best vein. He satirized James Sturgis, the representative of the bluebloods, the attorney for the corporations, in a gentle but effective way, and he outlined a program for the improvement of Dudley which would have made heaven a rowdy place by comparison if it were carried into effect. He did not fail to make the audience understand how generous it was of him to permit an opponent to come into his rally and heckle him.

"I suppose a good many candidates would have told Mr. Sturgis to collect his own crowds," he declared. "Some might have feared to meet such a distinguished lawyer and skilled cross-examiner lest he reveal something to their disadvantage. But my past is as clean as a hound's tooth. My career defies inquisition, my deeds are those of one who loves his fellow man, and I welcome Mr. Sturgis upon this platform.

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I ask my friends to give him a fair hearing. I now call for three cheers for James Sturgis, a fine man, if he is going to be beaten for district attorney."

The cheers were more hearty than Lem expected from a packed rally, but he set the violence of the applause down to his own eloquence. Then he beckoned to Mr. Sturgis, who was waiting in an anteroom, to come upon the stage. Sturgis, grave and dignified, strode upon the platform. He bowed to Toadsby, but ignored the outstretched hand, much to Lem's satisfaction, for it showed that he was more generous than his opponent. Then he bowed to the audience, received a round of applause, drew a pair of spectacles from one pocket and a roll of paper from another.

"He's going to read his speech, the old fool," thought Toadsby, who had seated himself in the center of the platform and beamed upon the opposition candidate with a graciousness which warmed the cockles of the heart of Mrs. Scott.

"I requested for the privilege of asking some questions, Mr. Toadsby," began Sturgis in a clear, penetrating voice. "Perhaps I should have said, making some charges."

"Go ahead counselor," smiled Lem.

"I charge you with receiving twenty thousand dollars from the Crafts Dairy Goods Company for bringing false charges against their competitor, the Thompson Dairy Products Company."

"It's a lie!" exclaimed Lem dramatically, springing to his feet.

It was the signal for his half of the audience to burst into a roar of fury. Sturgis weathered the storm, and, during a moment's lull, exclaimed:

"I charge you with paying the sum of one thousand dollars to Martin Jeffords to assassinate your confederate, Ralph Munroe, in a house on Cedar Street."

Toadsby heard this frightful accusation with a shrinking of the heart, but he had courage enough to extend both arms and shriek:

"A lie, a dirty lie! I'll jail you for this libel."

"I charge you with setting fire to the house on Lucus Street two nights ago, causing the death of two men."

"He's crazy, stark crazy!" exclaimed Toadsby, whose color was pale green and who was foaming at the mouth. "He has no proofs!"

"No proofs? Look!" shouted Sturgis, pointing behind Toadsby toward the edge of the stage.

Standing like an avenging spirit, with folded arms and accusing eye, was John Flanders, whom Lem had caused to burn to death two nights before. Toadsby turned, saw, emitted an unearthly howl, then fell to the floor and writhed in an epileptic fit.

"Officers, do your duty!" exclaimed James Sturgis. "I accuse this man of triple murder as well as arson." Then he turned to the audience and shouted:

"If there is a physician here, please come forward and attend to this man."

During this tragic scene the audience had stilled strangely. The minor denunciations of corruption had brought forth a storm, but the accusations of murder, the charging of the popular idol, Lem Toadsby, with two recent revolting crimes, had stunned his followers. And the conduct of Toadsby was tantamount to a confession, his complete collapse at the sight of his supposed victim condemned him.

Not a hand was lifted to interfere with the police in the removal of the accused when the physician had succeeded in bringing him out of his convulsions. The Toadsby followers filed slowly from the hall, shocked, broken, beaten and afflicted. Mrs. Scott was helped home by her stepson, a pathetic figure of a proud and confident woman completely stupefied.

The newspapers had been given a sensation the like of which had not been known in Dudley since its first settlement. Despite the craven behavior of Toadsby beneath the load of accusations, they dared not proclaim him a murderer because they had not seen Sturgis's proofs. And they could not overlook what had happened. So they contented themselves with a stenographic report of Sturgis's charges and a description of Toadsby's reception of them. But this was sufficient for two pages.

Toadsby was being attended at the Dudley Hospital, with two policemen guarding him. A few moments before the end of

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Toadsby's speech Fred Everett had shown sufficient evidence to a magistrate to secure a warrant for his arrest on the charge of accessory before the fact in the murder of Ralph Munroe. He had waited until this time lest a warning be sent to the candidate. Thus Lem had been carried from the hall under arrest.

An hour after his attack Toadsby was completely conscious and cursing his cowardice and weakness in collapsing before charges which must be based on little evidence and which were nine-tenths bluff. He was already preparing his defense, an admission that for years he had been subject to epilepsy, but had always been so fortunate as to be attacked in his own home.

The attacks could be brought on by any sort of shock, and in no sense could be considered an admission of guilt. He realized that he could not possibly be elected district attorney now, but this was a small matter; he was in danger of being convicted of a capital offense.

He swore he would never be convicted. Stone must come to his aid. He would force him to use all the machinery which he secretly controlled to save his lieutenant, under penalty of having himself dragged into danger by Lem.

All night he lay on his cot contriving and scheming, building up his line of defense, weighing probable evidence, wondering how he could confer with Sam Stone. What a fool he had been to allow the apparition of John Flanders to affright him. Since he was aware that Everett had escaped, he should have suspected the survival of Everett's partner. Instead, he had yielded to his guilty conscience and betrayed himself before a thousand people. What a fool! What a fool!

The case against Toadsby was being outlined, about midnight, in a room in the house of James Sturgis, by that eminent jurist, to a circle of supporters which included Jack Flanders, Fred Everett, and two or three well-known lawyers.

"It was the finest piece of strategy I ever saw, James," said United States Senator Watkins. "But how much of it was bluff?"

"Only the charge of arson. We knew that he was in the house an hour before the fire. We know the location of the two tramps and of Martin Jeffords. Jeffords had no motive to burn the place up, the tramps lost their lives, but Toadsby had every incentive to destroy our two friends here and Jeffords, the blackmailer and his accomplice in the Munroe murder.

"The fact that he was out of the house safely makes it morally certain that he set the fire. But we had no proof. He hated Flanders, had every reason to rejoice at his death; the lucky incident of the card case indicated that he was dead, and that was why we arranged the hocus-pocus of the apparition of Flanders at the psychological moment. His behavior on seeing Flanders convicted him in the minds of every person in the hall."

"But he will explain that; he will have a jury which was not present at the meeting. You have got to show proof at the trial."

"No, because we can convict him of being the instigator of the murder of Munroe. We can show the motive; we have two witnesses to conversations between him and Jeffords in which they admitted that he paid Jeffords to commit the crime. He can go to the chair for that in this State."

"And what was the motive?"

"Munroe's connection with the food investigation frauds. It happened that Everett, here bought Munroe's library at the auction of his effects. Between pages 546 and 547 of Volume XXIV of the Encyclopedia Britannica Fred found three or four letters and a number of notes which tie Toadsby up with Munroe. There is also a signed statement by Munroe of the amount received from each of the competing firms which conspired to bring about the food investigations and the amount paid to Toadsby. This makes it possible to indict them for conspiracy to injure their competitors."

"Was there anything which connected Stone with Toadsby in these frauds?" asked the Senator.

"Unfortunately, no. Evidently Munroe did not know that Toadsby split with Stone. But Stone is the majority stockholder of the Crafts Company, and we can

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indict and possibly convict him on a charge of conspiracy, especially if the officers squeal and confess that they went into the deal because of his instructions."

"But Stone controls the prosecuting machinery of the county," said Jim Scott, who was present at the conference, having been invited by Everett and Flanders because of his outspoken opinion of Toadsby directly after the meeting.

"No district attorney would dare *nol pross* the case against Toadsby, and in six weeks I shall take charge of the office," smiled Sturgis. "Toadsby cannot be brought to trial before six weeks, and we shall not ask indictments in the conspiracy cases until after my inaugural."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DEATH—AND A WEDDING.

THE day after the momentous meeting, as early in the morning as was decent, Jack Flanders presented himself at the Scott home in Everton and asked to see Miss Mary Trafford. The girl came down the front stairs immediately and went to him with both hands outstretched.

"I am so glad to see you. Wasn't it terrible about Mr. Toadsby? Poor aunt is prostrated. She admired him so."

"Were you very fond of Lem Toadsby?" asked Jack, still holding the hands and gazing hungrily into her melting brown eyes.

"I did think he was such a good man because he always made you think so, and I did like him; but that was because I did not know what he really was."

"But you didn't love him, Mary?"

"Of course not. Liking is very different from loving. And when I heard he tried to burn you up in that building, oh, I could have killed him!"

"You felt very badly when you heard I was dead?"

She nodded vigorously. "Of course. One feels badly when any friend dies or has a misfortune."

"Didn't you feel differently about me?"

Mary dropped her eyes. "You ask so many questions," she protested feebly.

"You don't know how I love you," he declared.

"You might tell me," she suggested, smiling.

So he did. It took him several hours. Then she told him how she felt, and that took a long time. Finally it was lunch hour, so he naturally stayed for lunch, and in the afternoon they strolled about the grounds.

When Jim Scott came home for dinner they were old engaged people, quite brazen about it.

Jim brought them news.

"Lem Toadsby is dead," he said. "He died at the hospital this afternoon. It is suspected that he was poisoned."

"Whoever killed him must be punished for it," declared Jack. "I think I know who is responsible for this new outrage."

"If you mean Sam Stone, he has left town. He went away this morning, and I don't believe he will ever come back. In some way he must have learned of our discovery of the food investigation conspiracy, and he may think we will be able to connect him with the Munroe murder. Stone always prepared to make a sudden getaway—probably had a big fortune in cash or easily negotiable securities in New York or London or Paris. With Toadsby silenced, I don't see how he can be extradited. The conspiracy charge isn't enough."

"Well," said Jack contentedly, "something will happen to him. Look at the quick end of Toadsby. At least the disappearance of those two men from Dudley means the end of rogue's rule."

"For a time," said Jim, with the cynicism of the big business man. "Then other rogues will obtain power—it's the way things go. And in the meantime, I presume there will be a wedding in this house pretty soon."

"In about a week," said Jack.

"A year," said Mary.

"A month," offered Jack.

"Six months," compromised Mary.

Accordingly it took place in three months.

THE END

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Her Own Rival

By BEATRICE ASHTON VANDEGRIFT

THE world is getting harder for women. Equal rights, bobbed hair, and the corner delicatessen notwithstanding, they ain't no edging away from the fact that life nowadays for us females ain't as simple as it was in the good old cave age.

I'd rather face a brontosaurus than my boss, earn my new fur coat with clubbery in place of drudgery, and even be towed to my cliffside home by my long and flowing hair instead of waiting till my mate could *get* the home and I could afford to *wave* my hair.

Waiting! That's what puts the crimp in love nowadays.

Five thousand years ago a good-looking, unshaved cave sheik would stroll out for a morning walk attired with leopard skin and hickory club. He'd spot a neighboring nancy daintily basting a bear steak over her father's fire. Twenty minutes later she'd be doing the same thing over his and mildly wondering if snake oil's a good cure for a sudden bump on the brain basket.

Fast work, huh? But focus the situation now.

A good looking, well shaved sheik strolls out for a morning walk attired in Palm Beach and cane. He spots a neighboring nancy daintily basting her lips away from her father's ire. Twenty minutes later he's wondering who she is. Married, single, divorced? How he can meet her and speak to her. Twenty hours later he's figuring how he can take her to dinner, a show and home in a meter machine without embezzling the company's funds. Twenty days later he's debating whether he ought to ask her to wait a year.

And they call this the age of speed!

I'd been waiting for my Tommy a year and they was still another to go. And somehow things seemed to be marking time. The old thrill had flewed—the thrill of kissing him, shy, on my own initiative—the thrill of flashing my sparkler in the subway, bringing light to them that rode in darkness, and hoping that everybody in our

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car would realize I was an engaged woman —the thrill of calling each other dear in front of friends—the thrill of our first meal cooked in the borrowed kitchen of my married chum that made it seem almost like our own home—all had wore away.

We loved each other—leastways I loved him.

A woman always loves a man who knows she uses rouge, who's lamped her with locks unkindled, who's seen her on a camping party when the only thing that's been marceled is the breakfast bacon. She couldn't let him see her that way unless she did love him. Put that in your brier root and inhale it, boys!

And I'd seen him, too—unshaven, unshorn and snoring. And I loved the prickly blue of his bearded cheek and the tousled mass of his rumpled locks. And my heart would leap as I bent over him, snoozing on the grass at my feet, to catch the rumble of his tired breathing. I loved him more at those times than when the barber's lilac still clung.

I guess the more a woman knows about a man the more she likes him, and the less a man knows about a woman the more he likes her.

And I've learned another thing, too.

Man may have discarded fur for serge and the cudgel for the razor, but the old instinct of the chase remains. Fifty centuries ago it was saber tooths and dinosaurs. Now it's golf balls and other women.

In the good old times man's hunting instincts were pretty well gratified after sixteen waking hours spent in plowing through the pleiocene swamps after itchyderms, flivversaurus and whiffendoofles, and he was perfectly satisfied to hike homeward to his hearth fire and the one woman he had selected, without roaming around the neighborhood after taps to see if they was any other nice little cuties that wasn't so knock-kneed or who had more and better teeth.

Yep, the instinct of the chase remains today. In the best and dearest men it remains—men like my Tommy.

I didn't realize it till one evening down to a dance at the Asbury Arcade where half a dozen of us weary New Yorkers had fled to escape the bright lights and meet brighter ones. Seems they was always a *crowd* of us going around nowadays.

Instead of sweetly suggesting, "Honey dear, let's get away from all these people and sit in the park," Tom would say, "Hey, Sadie, how about a foursome down to Luna to-night? Get Annabelle and her fellow—or Rose—or maybe that new girl down to your office would like to go."

And when we did go out with the crowd, instead of parking in some secluded corner all by ourselves Tom would sit right down in the midst of the assembly, brush off the chair next to him with his best tan moochoir and invite some baby doll to "come on over and sit with us."

But I guess I don't believe in signs until they're underlined, demonstrated and pointed out. It didn't come on me till that night at Asbury that the man I was going to marry wasn't much different from the rest.

We'd been dancing every dance like we always did. Folks who knew us got so they never thought to cut in. We seemed as complete in ourselves as Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

I was happy.

Across the shining floor, through the long open doors laid the balcony and the sea, tossing in the dark like a feverish kid in its sleep. And it seemed that Tom was restless with it.

We danced on, doing the same old steps we knew so well, not talking much because we'd said everything there was to say. I laid my head closer on that manly bosom with the nice lavender stripes and thought how deep and strong it was, and comforting —forever and ever.

So I sighed a little, I was so content.

"Tired, dear?" asked Tom, as he'd asked it a million times.

I raised my head and smiled—up into that sweet face with the brown eyes and the lips that could be so spunky.

"Nope," I answered bright. "Got too much powder on my nose?"

"A little. In the corner by your eye. Want my hanky?"

He dusted my nose off, careless but efficient, then parked my head on his chest

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again and looked over it and beyond. He was so tall!

"Say, Sadie," he commenced abrupt after a silence, "who's the new jane?"

"Where?"

"Over there, dancing with Tex. The girl with the yellow dress and the cute blond curls."

"That's Daisy Bennett—why?"

"Oh, nothing. Pretty, ain't she?"

"Yeh," I answered with hurt enthusiasm, the way all us girls does when the man we loves coos compliments about another member of our sex. "Oh, yeh, she's awful cute. Got one of them skins you'd love to touch—*up*," I added with malice.

"Kind of like to meet her," he muttered, averting his eyes and making his voice matter-of-fact as all men do when they're interested in something they oughtn't to be interested in. "Let's steer over their way and swap hops, huh?"

"Great!" I agreed, smiling the way you do in a dentist's chair when the dentist remarks what a nice set of molars you got. "I'd love to dance with Tex—for a change."

But oh, to think that after three hundred or so consecutive dances without interruption, my Tom was beginning to get tired of me! The men sure is a flickle lot.

Yet I approached my rival gay and giving Tom my compact to tote in his breast pocket over his heart where that silly little bottle blonde was going to park her haystack, I swung into Tex's polite embrace and let myself get lost in the mad revel without even a backward glance.

After the music stopped we moseyed back prompt to the meeting place under the date palm and stood, waiting. Tom wasn't there, and Tex seemed as anxious as a bridegroom at the church door.

"Daisy's always tooting off with some guy like this—and staying," he informed me, with an eye on the long door that led to the moon-mantled balcony. "She sure is hard to look after. Some sheik's always getting her in a dark corner and trying to make her forget me. Sometimes I don't think I'll stand for it." He scowled. "Oh here they come!"

I turned and saw and seethed.

From the balcony—with moonlight framing that gold hair and the ocean breeze billowing her short, sweeping skirts—come the Disturbing Element, hanging onto Tom's arm with both hers and looking up into his eyes with a mysterious smile.

Tom blushed as he handed her over to Tex.

"Oh, you big boy!" she flung back as she breezed away. "Don't you tell!"

Tom gave me a reassuring hug and we fell into our same old comfortable lockstep.

"Yeh," I muttered savage. "Daisies don't tell, all right—and she sure is a daisy."

My *fiancé* didn't say nothing. His eyes were dreamy and his lips curled a little at some remembrance that must have tickled him.

I couldn't bear no more.

"Got to fix my stocking," I whispered, choky. "Meet me outside the dressing room."

There was nobody there as I bust through the door and flopped on the little seat by the mirror. And my elbows made vicious tracks in the powder that caked the bureau—marble-topped it was, like them yellow-haired flappers that, in a minute, steal the love of a year.

But there must be a reason. There's a reason for everything, even parsley and mosquitoes, if we only prove it.

So I looked at myself in the glass, stern—at the old familiar brown bob, parted in the middle where Tom would always smooth it down so tender on both sides of my old familiar face. Not that I was a homely hepzibah. I was almost as good-looking as that blonde, with the aid of a little powder, rouge and the lipstick, them three things that has done more than all else to make women equal.

But the trouble was Tom *knew*. He'd never seen that blond baby going through the process of evolution. He'd only viewed the finished product. And that made her interesting.

Interesting! That was it.

I had ceased being such to my Tom. Distance lends enchantment. Familiarity breeds contempt—all them old wheezes dinned in my head till I would of went

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balmy if I hadn't kept on looking at myself steady in the glass.

What did he say to that girl on the balcony? What did they talk about? What did they *do?* Say, let me tell you this—it ain't the *One* Woman who really knows about her man. It's the *Other* Woman!

The fact bust on me like a cloudburst and with it a bright idea flashed forth like lightning.

All right, then, I'd *be* the other woman! I'd be distant, fascinating, new. I'd be a vamp—the kind that lingers in the lilac dusk when the moon is low or who languishes on her *chaise longue* and lets her anguished lover kiss the hem of her pale pink negligee.

Yep, that's the kind I'd be, for that's the kind men want. They don't want a woman to share their burdens or bring slippers for their tired feet or hold the mirror while they shave. They want a baby doll to share their fun and call them Romeo and hold their hand while they rave. And I'd be that kind.

It took me a week to figure how, but when I got through I'd doped out a plot that would of been good for a year's run on Broadway.

I was going to accompany Tom on his vacation, unbeknownst to him—to be near him, to play the part of the "new girl next door."

It was easy. Tom had told me to address all postcards to Tent No. 88, City Island, beginning August 16. Three days later I was the proud possessor of Tent No. 90 on the same island for one week, beginning August 16.

And I was alone. Mysterious females always are. When two go together they're merely "girls," but when there's only one she's "that woman." So I went alone, though my best chum, Ida Mae Gumpel, took Tent No. 92. A woman can be just as mysterious under secret chaperonage.

We arrived at City Island on the evening of the sixteenth, when all the water round about was laying in a quiet calm with tall boats on the bay lifting their sharp masts to prick blood from the sunset sky. On the shore stretched rows and rows of tents, lined up like soldiers on summer parade. Gosh, it was so pretty it almost cured the awful ache that clutched round my heart with fingers that wouldn't let go.

But I wasn't there to fall into fits over nature's wonders. I had a grim masquerade to perform—the masquerade of being the Other Woman. For, if I gotta have a rival, I want to be it.

Tom's tent was quiet. He must be out fishing or something. Tom always was good on throwing out a line. So Ida Mae helped me unpack and arrange my new personality.

The first step consisted in donning a blond wig with long and beauteous curls. Ida's director gave it to her when she was playing an extra once out to Fort Lee.

Over my old familiar brown bob it went, and though it felt like a brush heap I grinned brave and bore up. Then out of my week-end bag I extracted a filmy thing of pink what had been stored away deep in my cedar chest awaiting the day.

I felt mean wearing it. 'Twas like looting a church to loot that little old hope chest of mine with all the dreams it held. But then, I figured it was the only way I could make them selfsame dreams come true.

"Gosh all golf balls!" commented my girl friend, surveying me with admiration. "Gee, you look great! But say," she added, doubt tingeing her voice, "anybody'd know it was you. All Tom's gotta do is lamp them brown eyes and the merry old smile and he's got your number, honey. How are you gonna work it?"

"*Lamp* me is right," I declared, mysterious. "That's all he's gonna do is *lamp* me. Where's the kerosene burner I brung? Light it, will you? That's right. Now, Ida, you toddle outside, look in and see the movies."

I took my pink chiffon train in hand and commenced to perform a series of fascinating maneuvers in front of the lamp.

"Oh-h!" trickled Ida Mae's wondering tones from without.

"Would you know it was me?" I called, palpitant.

"Never!" she whispered. "Gee, Sadie, you look great! Just like a Tony Sarg soubrette or whichever."

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"Take another squint," I ordered, soft, twining my arms above my head and draping myself on the army cot. "Behold, Oh Well's Outline of Mystery. Some shadow picture, huh? Ida, would I in any way appeal to the lure-loving instincts of the average man?"

"You tell 'em, dearie," cooed Ida, loyal as any woman friend can be. "Now that the stage is set O. K. Sadie, can I toddle to the home tent and snooze? It's been a great but galling day."

"One more deed of charity, old faithful," I begged. "Trot out your uke banjo, tickle a few tunes when my hero comes, and then, to the echoes of soft music, you may slip away and leave me do the rest."

"All right," sighed Ida, weary but willing. "Say, here comes somebody now!"

"It's him!" I whispered. "Squelch the spot-light and shush."

Two pairs of masculine feet trod up the sandy walk and scraped across the plank floor of the tent next door.

"Hang 'em outside," come my *fiancé's* firm tones, and my heart warmed but froze. "They'll smell like the devil in here."

Point of information number one. So that's the way my soft-spoken little sugar baby talks when he's out in the wilds with his men friends! Gee, but I was learning lots. He swore!

"We'll have 'em for breakfast," stated another voice that I didn't recognize. So Tom had strange men friends, too!

"O. K.," agreed my hero. "Got a match, Hal?"

"Yeh."

Come the soft slur of sulphur on shoe soles and a long inhaling, mingled with a sigh of content.

"Let's sit out front," suggested Hal, after a pause.

"Too damn many mosquitoes."

"Well, I'd rather get a few bites than suffer in this blamed hot hole," argued Tom's boy friend.

They left the tent, and there was the shuffle of settling cushions.

"Now!" I whispered to Ida, who squatted with ukelele poised.

She picked a few chords for an opener, and I commenced singing in the new voice I'd been practicing for a week. I was surprised at myself. It didn't seem me at all. It was soft and sweet and intriguing, and after a while it come to me as natural as chirping to a cricket.

"All alone, I'm so all alone," I began, gaining assurance in the dark. "There is no one else but you."

In between notes I could almost feel keen interest in the silence that hung over the tent next door.

"Wondering where you are—and how you are—and if you are all alone, too," I concluded with honeyed significance.

Ida strummed to a stop.

There come a portentous clearing of throats. H-m! H-m!

I went through the piece again, softer this time, and on the last two bars I was accompanied by base voices from out of the evening.

Say, I'd got him going already—the darn little flirt! Only one day on his vacation and accompanying the girl next door! Only twenty-four hours had my farewell kiss been drying on them fickle lips, and he was already pursing them to tunes from the Woman Across the Way. And the fact that that woman was me didn't help any. I was getting jealous of myself.

I couldn't act no more—not that day anyhow. Maybe to-morrow, but no more then. Something went dry in my throat and I felt tired.

"Go home, Ida," I whispered. "Thanks, deary, and sleep tight."

There was no shadow show that evening. I sat a long time in the dark, thinking, and the more I thought the bigger got the lump in my throat till my breath come deep and painful.

Yep, I sat there, a lonely woman of mystery, watching the moon peep impertinent through the tent flap and listening to the soothing lap of the waves on the shore.

Across the white city of tents come the passionate bass of a male quartet, taking up the burden of the evening's musical entertainment where my little girl friend had left off.

"Slumber-r-r on, my lit-tle Gyp Me Sweetheart," they sang with throbbing abandon, and the words clutched my heart.

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Then come the final noises of bedtime—the slop of water throwed out back—the creak of a cot being put up—a high and tedious tirade from the married couple across the way who was arguing as to who really upset the canoe that afternoon, and was it on purpose.

All the great colony of vacationists around me subsided into a soothing, sonorous snore.

Tom and his inspiring friend Hal was still sitting out, and the moon had climbed high above the rippling bay before they spoke again.

"Time to flatten the ferns, Tom," said Hal with a yawn that padded on the night air like a cat's tread. "I'm going on in, anyhow. Coming?"

"Naw, I'll stay out a minute. Gotta write a letter, and it's light enough. Moon's bright as blazes."

"Letter? Who to?" asked Hal, indifferent.

"Oh, nobody—just my girl," answered Tom, hesitant.

"Hah, got a skirt!" exclaimed the man friend with interest.

Tom didn't say nothing, but I could almost feel him blush through the darkness. I leaned forward and tuned my ears intent to the low sound of their voices. Say, but this was good!

"What's she like?" went on Hal.

"All right."

"Pretty?"

"Sure!" snorted Tom, aroused. "What do you think?"

"Trust you to pick 'em right," complimented Hal with admiration.

"Sure I pick 'em right," boasted my *fiancé*, "every old time."

My heart pounded in my chest like a high-powered engine raring to go. Then it sputtered and died. And right then and there I picked up Point of Information Number Two—next to the Other Woman, the one who gets the best inside dope on your sweetheart is the Man Friend.

And it hurt me.

I didn't feel like the Woman Next Door—fascinating, free, powerful. I only felt like little Sadie Huggins, back home in her Tenth Avenue flat, loving her Tom and wondering where he was and how he was, and if he was all alone, too.

Hal's laugh cut in on my thoughts like a razor blade on a tender cheek.

"What are you laughing at anyhow?" asked Tom, a little mad. "Sadie's the greatest girl in the world, and when we get married—"

"Oh," intoned Hal, "so you're gonna marry her?"

"Yes," answered Tom, short.

My heart come to life again. I wanted to run out and throw my arms around his dear old neck and print a million loving kisses on the lips that had spilled them sweet words. My Tom—my own true Tom. I could of kicked myself four ways for having doubted him thus.

"Got a pen?" called Tom, as Hal went inside and commenced arranging blankets or such from the soft sound they made.

"Naw—left all that truck at the office. This is a vacation, stupe."

"Never mind," murmured my dear boy. "I'll use a lead pencil. Sadie will understand."

"Give her my love!" sang out Hal with a snicker.

"Aw, go to the devil," growled Tom, and there was a silence, a beautiful, busy silence in which the man of my heart penned me a loving missile. What could of been sweeter?

"Say," broke out Tom after awhile, a little indistinct as he give the envelope a long, soft lick, "who's the dame next door?"

"Don't know," answered Hal, careless, "but she sure does maul a wicked uke."

"Her voice is queer, kind of. Reminds me of somebody I know, and yet it don't. Wonder if she's good-looking."

"Who knows?" whistled Hal, blithe. "The morrow may tell. Getting up at six?"

"Yeh. Set the clock. And say, where do you mail letters?"

"Down that wide street and turn left. What'd you tell sweetie, huh? 'Sad and blue, lonely, too? Ain't nothing doing here without you.' Oh, boy!"

"Shut up!" snapped Tom, savage.

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There was a final silence. So I went to my weary couch, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

Oh, men, men! If woman is the eternal sphinx, look to man and you'll know the reason.

II.

FIVE days sped and Saturday come, the night when we was all to bust camp and get ready to go back to the old grind, as the scissor man terms his business.

And in them five days things had progressed like a bridge party.

Every evening we held a concert between the two tents, unseen but not unsung. And Tom would call out merry things back and forth such as:

"Hey, Ukelele Kid, Ha-wai-i?" or "Aw, come on out and gab awhile. Don't be so bashful, mystery girl. You're among friends." Or, "Say, who are you anyhow? The Queen of She-Bear or maybe So-lonely herself? You got me wondering, little one. I bet you're some baby. Listen, what color are your eyes? Broadway blue? And your hair—say, you're the only girl I know with corkscrews à la Pickford. How do I know? From your shadow on the tent. Sure, you never knew it, but I watched you every night, combing out them fairy locks of yours. And it's got me, little one."

Such was the words of sweetness that fell on my aching heart. But I bore up brave and played the game. When love is wounded it's better to kill it outright—like a horse with a broken leg. And though you hate to see it die, that which had been so beautiful and faithful and true, still, all you can do is shut your eyes and pull the trigger.

And that's what I decided to do on the last night of camp—pull the trigger on the love that had been ours.

The boys hadn't come back yet from their final boat trip on the bay as me and Ida ate the last supper in silence.

In the west, behind us, the sun dipped down in a blaze of color—reds and orange and a saffron yellow and the pale mistiness of smoky purple, so that even the eastern sky got jealous and tried to imitate it while the moon hung hesitant, wan and pale, waiting for the dynasty of day to end and the reign of night begin.

And all this beauty—calm, cool, indifferent to the turmoil of this little earth—only stung me more. Sunset is made for lovers. Moons are made for love. It should of been raining and thundering and lightning to match the emotions of my anguished heart.

But to all outward appearances I was as serene as an actress on her four hundredth appearance. I was becoming accustomed to my rôle. It was the only thing in all this troubled world that seemed the least bit real. I even hummed a little as I turned to let Ida drape my blue chiffon frock—the sweet dress of dreams that I was going to wear for tea on the boardwalk at Atlantic City the second day of our honeymoon. And now I was wearing it to a funeral—the funeral of our love.

"Gosh, but you're wonderful, Sadie!" breathed Ida, between a row of pins in her front teeth. "He'll fall for you to-night, sure."

"Yeh," I commented, indifferent. "Well, let him pick a soft place, then, 'cause he's gonna lay a long, long time."

"Atta girl, Cleo," approved my bosom friend. "Treat 'em crool."

The moon was high and bright as my erstwhile *fiancé* and his man friend tramped up the walk to home, still munching the remains of a torrid terrier and roll what they had picked up down to the hot dog man's on the beach.

"Skip, Ida!" I whispered, hasty. "And leave me to my Mark."

I stood awhile at the tent flap, a solitary, statuesque figure in trailing, ethereal blue, waiting for my victim to prepare for the sacrifice.

I heard the splash, splash of water in a tin basin, the gurgle of words mumbled through a towel, the scrape of the razor on a well-known cheek, a whistling—the satisfied whistling of a man that's bent on lady killing.

Then come the aroma of barber's lilac, the kind that Tom always used. And it wafted to my widened nostrils and made my head a little dizzy and my heart ache. It was so much like Tom.

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"Somebody loves me. I wonder who? I wonder who it can be?" he whistled with great significance. I smiled sardonic to myself.

Who? Who, indeed?

"Hey!" he called so suddenly it scared me. "Hey, woman next door—the moon's out!"

"So am I," I laughed, short but not unpleasant.

"Tell that to the submarines," he hooted. "You're in, but you oughtta be out—out under the bright silvery moon, talking to me."

"Sounds alluring," I remarked, coy.

"Are you coming?"

"Maybe."

"Well, you'd better. I want to see you. Camping right next door to a girl like you and going home without seeing her is like being in Rome and missing the Coliseum. Aw, come on out!"

"All right," I submitted. "Wait till I wind a scarf around my lily neck. The breeze is cool."

"No more than you, Lady of the Iceberg," he said, reproachful. "Oh, there you are!"

He stood like a statue, watching me trip toward him through the sand, my long skirts billowing out behind me the way that blonde's did as she and him emerged from the Asbury balcony. Back of me the moon was making a wonderful crown of gold around my borrowed locks as it does to the movie heroine's—or so I fondly imagined.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Tom, too petrified to say anything more.

I glided toward him, my face lost in the deep violet of evening.

"Gosh!" breathed Tom again, like a drowning man coming up for the second time. "Gosh, but you're beautiful, no kidding!"

I smiled serene and come to his side.

"You're like a queen," he floundered. "Like a—a angel."

I put out my white hand and touched his shoulder, intriguing.

"And a cunning little devil, too," he added, sly.

I bent my head nearer to his cheek and let my stolen goldilocks graze his new shave.

The evening swam in on us, close and sweet. On the shore the waves of the bay beat insistent. A breeze fanned our faces and bore a fragrant smell like cinnamon from some far bush inland.

I raised my head, framed against the moon. Tom's arms went around me. Let him crush me. Maybe he could crush out the terrible hurt that still lingered in my cold heart. But I was serene—serene, smiling and seductive. The Other Woman!

I felt it coming. He bent down and I didn't turn away. His breath was warm and close. He was nearer. All right, pull the trigger on our love! It would be all over in a minute.

But he let me go, brutally sudden, and turned away, sobbinglike.

"Aw, gosh," he muttered, "aw, gosh—I can't do it. You see, I—I got a girl back home!"

My heart leaped with joy. Warm, new fires were kindled in it to glow forever and ever.

He couldn't do it! He had a "girl back home." The other woman—the *other woman!* How sweet was that thought in my bosom. The other woman—back home.

He was starting to go when I stopped him.

"*Tom!*" I whispered, tense.

He turned.

"Sadie! Why, Sadie!"

He didn't ask me why, or how come or anything stupid. He only come back and wrapped me close and pushed back the hateful golden hair off my brow so that he could smooth down the dear old familiar brown bob. And he kissed me with all the love in the world.

Then after awhile he whispered so low he had to say it a second time: "Oh, Sadie. Oh, Sadie, dear—let's go and get married right now. Look, dear—we got all day Sunday for a honeymoon!"

And it was a beautiful day.

THE END

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Thirteen Days

By EARL WAYLAND BOWMAN

ONCE and for all I'm goin' to write the true story of my life and how I come to be in the Kokkopola County jail out here in Arizona for cow stealin'. It's about the worst jail I was ever in, and God knows that's sayin' a lot! But it doesn't matter now. Nothin' matters since my terrible experience in the Kokkopola County jail. The only advantage of being in the Kokkopola County jail seems like is the chance it has give me to write the true story of my life, and when I get to studyin' about it I can't think of any book I ever read that's half as interesting as the story of my life is.

My name is Jefferson Suggens, my pa's name was Ezra Suggens, my ma's name was Eliza Suggens, I was born in Hickory County, Missouri, twenty-seven years and a half ago, and I've been called Jeff for short ever since I can remember, and I've wondered lots of times why somebody hasn't already wrote the story of my life. But for some reason or other they haven't, so I'm goin' to write it myself.

I've been in the Kokkopola County jail for cow stealin' for thirteen days now, and I can say from the bottom of my heart that every second has seemed like a hour, every hour a week and every week a thousand years. So, as far as my personal feelings are concerned I've already been in the Kokkopola County jail one million one hundred and twenty-three thousand two hundred hours, three hundred and twelve weeks and a thousand and a little over eight hundred years.

Just imagine crowdin' all that time into thirteen days!

But anybody that's ever been in the Kokkopola County jail will know what I mean. Outsiders can't understand it. They have no idea how slow time can go when a man's in the Kokkopola County jail for cow stealin'. And God knows I never stole a cow in my life.

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Whatever might have happened in regard to steers and calves, I can look the whole world in the eye, just as I looked Susie Mallet in her dear, sweet blue eyes—God bless her heart!—and say from the depths of my being:

"No, Susie, I never stole a cow in my life!"

That's what I told Susie when Pap Johnson, who is Susie's uncle in addition to being sheriff of Kokkopola County, and his posse, includin' Lafe Barrilla, brung me into Los Cedros just because they happened to find me over in Passaquoia Cañon sort of driftin' along behind sixty or seventy white-face KV Bar heifers and cows. Just on that account and because the cows was kind of headed toward the Mexican line, and I was sort of curious to see where they was goin' and just thought I'd drag along behind them on old Yallerbelly, my broncho, awhile and then if I met any of the KV Bar outfit lookin' for them I'd know where to tell them they'd probably gone to, old Pap and his gang surrounded me unexpectedlike and brung me in and locked me up in the Kokkopola County jail for cow stealin'. Consequently, I ain't got the least idea yet where them blamed cows finally drifted to. But I told Susie like I said:

"No, Susie, I never stole a cow in my life!"

Susie looked me in the eye when I told her that and put her little white hand on my arm and her sweet red lips quivered and she said:

"Jeff, I believe you, and I got a hunch the whole thing's a scheme of Lafe Barrilla's to get you out of the way so he can make love to me, but I'll die before I let him, and as far as I'm concerned, Lafe Barrilla, even if he is Uncle Pap's deputy sheriff, is just the same as a dead dog to me!"

Susie's words was nectar to my ears; they cheered me up and I just looked at her in dumb gratitude and then she put both her arms around my neck right in front of all of them and said:

"Of course, you didn't steal them cows, Jeff! I know you didn't steal them cows. Why should you? You don't use milk or cream in any shape or form and what in th' name of Gawd would you want to steal a cow for?"

But in spite of that they locked me up in this Kokkopola County jail for cow stealin' and here I've been ever since, lookin' out through the bars, and to add to my sufferin', old Pap Johnson, Susie's uncle and sheriff, has delegated Lafe Barrilla himself to be my jailer while Pap has gone off somewhere and Lafe sets all day by the side of the front door of the jail smokin' cigarettes and wishin' to Gawd no doubt that I'd make a break or something and give him a chance to shoot me.

To have Lafe Barrilla for a jailer ought to be agony enough. But to make matters worse Susie brings my grub supper times to the jail from the Greek's restaurant and gives it to Lafe, and then he sticks it in to me through the bars of the jail door, after which Susie and him do a good deal of visitin' together. Sometimes she comes down to the jail during the daytime and, in spite of what she said, I've got a feelin' that she is gradually bein' won away from me by the very man she said was just the same as a dead dog to her.

Saturday Susie and Lafe walked over toward Rattlesnake Ridge, and as I watched them strollin' it looked to me like they was altogether too blamed friendly.

But such thoughts is bitter. They fill me with unhappy feelin's and make it more bitter for me to be here in the Kokkopola County jail for cow stealin'. I mustn't let bitterness creep in and poison my life. Though what my life 'll be from now on if Susie Mallet is really takin' up with Lafe Barrilla, Gawd only knows. I hate to think about it. That's one reason I'm startin' in to write the true story of my life and how I come to be in the Kokkopola County jail for cow stealin'.

Maybe writin' my life will help me get my mind off of Susie. But I doubt it, because, after all, Susie is responsible for me bein' in the Kokkopola County jail for cow stealin'. The way it happened was as follows:

Ever since I can remember women have had a strange fascination for me. 'Specially women about twenty-two years old, with blue eyes, red lips, fluffy hair, *et cetera,*

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kind of slim built like a gold dust filly like Susie Mallet is. The first time I saw Susie I knowed I was hit harder than I'd ever been hit by any other woman—and Gawd knows I've had some awful jolts from some of them.

It was on a never-to-be-forgotten evening last August. I had rid into Los Cedros from Del Querrata, hungry enough to eat a bear; dismountin' from old Yallerbelly in front of the Greek's restaurant, I went in and set down at the counter. Susie Mallet was waitin' on the counter and she knocked me cold the instant her sweet blue eyes looked into my greenish brown ones as she pushed the bill of fare at me and said:

"Whatcha ord'rin'?"

Even the sound of her voice thrilled me. There was something in it that made me think of my boyhood days when I played about among the blackjack swamps, the hazel nut thickets, the persimmon groves, the flint-covered ridges down in dear old Hickory County, Missouri, while dad was out coon huntin' and mam perhaps was stirrin' soft soap in the big iron kettle over the fire beside the smokehouse or bakin' cornbread with cracklin's in it for the hounds.

Dad was always strong for hounds. He had more than Parm Davis and Henry Grissom both put together, and Gawd knows that's sayin' a lot. And I'd give anything almost to be down there at this minute listenin' to the shrill, mournful yelp of old Queen as she led the pack on the trail of a fox or a coon, to say the least, old Bus runnin' by her side with old Rat, the one dad cut his tail off of on account of him carryin' it high and always splittin' it on barb wire fences when he'd run under them, bayin' musically across the countryside.

That's the way Susie Mallet struck me when I first saw her.

"Ham an' eggs, I reckon!" I finally stammered.

And it seemed like I could hear the red birds whistlin' in the dogwood trees down in dear old Hickory County in the springtime when Susie turned her face sidewise to me and called toward the kitchen:

"Wunst on th' ham an'!"

"Turn 'em over!" I said.

"Flop 'em!" she echoed toward the kitchen, and her voice was like a flute, or the E-string on dad's fiddle, to say the least.

When Susie brung the ham an' eggs we got to talkin' and, while we was talkin', Lafe Barrilla come in. From the way Lafe looked at me while we was talkin' I knowed right off the bat that I had a deadly rival, but Susie practically ignored him, and I went ahead and told her about quittin' the Double Z Circle outfit up on the Gila and thinkin' I'd head down into Sonora or, maybe, even Yaqui Valley, and try to get hold of a piece of land and start in to raisin' a few cattle on my own hook.

"Why don't you stick around Los Cedros?" Susie asked me, then kind of blushed and suggested: "Things might be more interestin' here than you imagine!"

That settled it. From then on I didn't have any ambition to go down into Sonora or the Yaqui Valley or anywhere else. While thinkin' thoughts like that I glanced across at Lafe Barrilla and saw him gnashin' his teeth.

"Who's that feller watchin' me like a road runner watchin' a rattlesnake?" I asked Susie.

Susie throwed one fleetin' look at him and said:

"Him? Oh, that's Lafe Barrilla, Uncle Pap has just appointed him a deputy. Why, Gawd only knows! He thinks he's a lady-tamer, but he ain't!"

Lafe must have heard what Susie said. He frowned worse than ever, hurried up eatin' his pie and coffee—that's all he'd ordered, got up, went outside, and when I finally went out, too, after arrangin' to see Susie that evenin' and maybe go to a picture show, Lafe was waitin' for me.

As I started across to where I'd left old Yallerbelly, my faithful horse, Lafe yelled at me:

"Hey, you!"

I turned around calm and said:

"Was you yellin' at me?"

"I was!" Lafe snapped and come out into the street. "What I want to know is how come you drift into Los Cedros and get so damned familiar all of a sudden?"

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I just grinned without gettin' a bit excited, and said:

"It's none of your damned business!"

Lafe jerked back his coat to expose his deputy's badge an' revolver handle and said:

"I'm a officer, and you look like a suspicious person to me! For a nickel I'd lock you up in jail!"

I just laughed.

"A nickel ain't compensation enough for a job like that!" I told him, takin' a dollar out of my pocket. "I'll just give you a dollar to try it an' let you get your hand on your gun to start with if you think that's any advantage!"

Lafe reached for his gun. Before he got it, however, I swung the loaded end of my quirt on his head and knocked him stiff. Then I stood there till he come to and when he did I give him fair warnin':

"My name's Jeff Suggens," I said, "I'm a cow-puncher that has decided to stick around Los Cedros awhile and the best thing to do is to let me stick without interruption!"

Lafe got up and started to dustin' off his pants.

"I'll get you yet, dang you!" he snarled. "You've assaulted a officer!"

"If I have," I said, cold as ice, "it was because the so-called officer got too fresh, an' if there's anything I despise it's freshness!"

Mutterin' curses, Lafe departed toward the Kokkopola County jail, which is on the south edge of Los Cedros on the barrenest sand ridge they could find, apparently, and where I've been for thirteen miserable days now for cow stealin' and am finally writin' my life story and how I come to be here.

But Susie and me went to the picture show that night. And, oh, that was the beginnin' of happy hours!

The next day I got a job ridin' line for the Circle U outfit, and from then on till the misfortune of gettin' in the Kokkopola County jail come on me, I'd come to Los Cedros three or four times a week to see Susie and go to a dance or somethin'.

Susie has got a moon-eyed pinto broncho her Uncle Pap Johnson give her named Lirio, which she keeps in the livery stable, and on Sundays she'd saddle Lirio, which is Mexican for Lily, and ride out to where I'd tell her I'd be waitin' on old Yallerbelly and bring some sandwiches and we'd take a trip up among the piñons on Purple Angel Mountain or else down along the mesquite-fringed banks of Rio Santa Rita and have picnics together.

Gawd, them was happy events!

But now, here I am, settin' in the Kokkopola County jail for cow stealin'; Lafe Barrilla, like a vulture waitin' at the gate, sets in front of the jail watchin'; my faith and trust in Susie Mallet's practically gone and when I think of everything that's happened, my cup of wormwood an' gall is runnin' over with agony!

It makes me tremble to think of what will happen to Lafe Barrilla if I ever get another chance at him. If I ever do, so help me Gawd, old Pap Johnson is goin' to need another deputy.

But I mustn't let myself dwell on it too much. Gawd knows I never stole them cows; justice has got to some day triumph and no true Suggens will let his soul rankle or his heart poison with despair.

Maybe after all the whole thing is just a plan of fate's to test me and make me a better man when it's all over, if it ever is all over. But the way time drags when a man's in the Kokkopola County jail for cow stealin' and Lafe Barrilla sets at the front door sneerin' while the woman a man has trusted more than any woman he's ever seen before acts as if she's forgot all about him and is playin' up to a man like Lafe Barrilla, it's almost enough to rankle his soul and poison his heart.

Susie brings my grub to the jail from the Greek's restaurant of an evening; Lafe takes it and pokes it in the jail door to me; then they set out there and laugh and talk—

No wonder I ain't got no appetite!

How can a man eat while Susie sets out in front of the Kokkopola County jail laughin' and talkin' with Lafe Barrilla while I'm inside of it for cow stealin'? Last night after Susie brung my supper they set out there and talked and laughed until it seemed like I couldn't stand it. But it was worse even when they quit talkin' and laughin' and everything was still— It was then my

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imagination gave me hell! And sometimes I almost wish I didn't have any!

Women can be awful cruel.

Susie and me had planned on gettin' a piece of land, startin' a ranch, gettin' some cattle and eventually developin' a family and everything seemed cheerful till I accidently got to watchin' them KV Bar whiteface cows and heifers driftin' toward the Mexican line and old Pap Johnson and Lafe Barrilla and that crowd got the idea I was tryin' to steal them and locked me up in the Kokkopola County jail.

Of nights I set here alone with my thoughts; just far enough from Los Cedros to hear the faint tinkle of the music from old Bonanza's dance hall and when the wind is just right smell the ham an' eggs cookin' in the Greek's restaurant. I set here and peer through the barred winder of my prison at the white moonlight streamin' over the waves of sand and desolation of the desert and it seems like even if a coyote would start to yelpin' it would be a relief.

Last night I was settin' that way and a scorpion crawled across the floor—

I squashed it. It made nine I've squashed in the terrible thirteen days I've been in the Kokkopola County jail for cow stealin'. I believe Lafe Barrilla catches them and sneaks them in just to torment me. When I squashed it I thought: "Oh, Gawd, if I was only even a scorpion I could crawl out of here and if there was any way possible I'd sure as hell bite Lafe Barrilla!"

Every day I hate him more. Every time I look out toward the jail office and see my gun and belt hangin' on the wall where they hung it when they locked me up for cow stealin' I wish worse and worse that I could get hold of it for just one minute. If I could, Lafe Barrilla would be no more.

There's murder in my heart. I can't keep it out. If Susie Mallet could only realize that even a cow-puncher is capable of emotions of awful agony she surely wouldn't play up to that ornery Lafe Barrilla who is worse than a cross between a gila monster and an insane hydrophobia cat, while the man she plighted her troth to and who would go through hell and brimstone for her sake languishes helpless and lonesome in the Kokkopola County jail for cow stealin'!

Yesterday afternoon Susie and Lafe went ridin'. I watched them depart out of the iron barred winder of the Kokkopola County jail. They headed for the Rio Santa Rita and when they went over the bridge I gnashed my teeth in anguish and wish to Gawd a thunder storm would come up and lightnin' would strike them both dead. But it didn't. It stayed clear all afternoon.

When they got back Lafe come and leered at me.

And last night, after Susie brung my supper, and Lafe poked it in to me they set out in front and talked and laughed till the moon come up and when Susie started back to Los Cedros I heard her say:

"To-morrow night I'll bring you some. Mike said he was going to get some in the morning and if he does I'll bring you some!"

Lafe laughed and said:

"Bring plenty!"

Mike is the Greek that runs the restaurant where Susie waits on the counter and all I could think of was that Mike was goin' to get some bootleg booze and if he did Susie was goin' to bring Lafe some.

The thought was agony. Because from the way Susie said it it sounded like if she did she might drink some of it with Lafe and I've been around to know that a woman that'll drink bootleg booze with a man is liable to do 'most anything. Which is another terrible thought for a man to have that cares for a woman like I care for Susie Mallet.

It was after that and with them thoughts that I set down on my hard iron cot in the miserable Kokkopola County jail and watched the pale monlight pourin' through the steel-barred winders that shut me out from life and Susie and the chance to beat hell out of Lafe Barrilla and saw the scorpion crawlin' on the floor and squashed it. And no one who has ever been in the Kokkopola County jail can blame me for squashin' it.

How I got through that night Gawd only knows. Vultures of despair gnawed at my vitals like magpies peckin' at a saddle sore on a broncho's back; bitter thoughts stung my imagination the way a million bull gnats sting a man in the eyes when the sun

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comes out after a rain over in the Rio Santa Rita bottoms.

But finally I sunk into fitful slumber and dreamed I was a prairie dog down in a hole, and Lafe Barrilla was a badger and had me cornered and was diggin' me out, and all of a sudden I turned into a rattlesnake, and without even stoppin' to rattle, up and bit him, and he squealed and swelled up and died in awful agony, and I waked myself up laughin' for joy. Oh, how disappointed I was to find out it was just a dream!

But that's all it was, and Lafe ain't dead.

This morning he brung my breakfast, poked it in and leered at me again. I'm gettin' so I can't stand that leerin'. Then he stood there, twistin' his blamed little shoe brush mustache, tryin' to look cocky, and said:

"If you'll watch out this evenin' you'll see something!"

I knowed he knowed I knowed what he meant. It galled me. I knowed he knowed I knowed he meant I'd see him and Susie on a wild orgie with bootleg booze. It almost drove me frantic.

"Yes, you detestable reptile," I told him, grittin' my teeth, "an' if you'll just open that door for a second you'll feel something!"

He shrunk. He knowed what I meant, too. He knowed I meant he'd feel my bare, Gawd-given hands rendin' him limb from limb like a catamount rends a jackrabbit, and tearin' his black heart out by the very roots.

Lafe didn't open the door.

Oh, if it wasn't for the comfort of writin' my life story, and how I come to be in the Kokkopola County jail for cow stealin', I couldn't endure it. All day the hot sun has beat down with blisterin' fury on the 'dobe walls of my prison; all day I've paced the narrow confines of my cell, while Lafe Barrilla has set out there in front smokin' cigarettes, leerin', twistin' his miserable little mustache and bein' as disagreeable as possible.

Suspense is awful. Where it's mixed with imagination it's worse still—

At last the sun is goin' down. The black shadows of evening are fallin' across the vast stretches of desolate landscape. Purple Angel mountain, where Susie and me spent so many happy hours eatin' sandwiches under the piñons, is fadin' from view, and the dismal curtain of twilight is fallin' over the earth.

It's almost time for Susie to come—

Gawd — Susie's comin'! I just looked out of the winder and saw her comin'. She's ridin' Lirio and leadin' old Yallerbelly! Now I know what their dastardly scheme is—

Oh, Susie, Susie, how could you? She's bringin' some of Mike's bootleg booze to Lafe; they'll drink it and then they're plannin' on goin' for a ride across the desert.

Oh, that I was a Samson to pull down the thick, strong walls of the Kokkopola County jail! If I could I'd raise hell with them two! I never heard of the like: the idea of Susie Mallet, the woman who I've pinned all my faith to bringin' my own faithful old Yallerbelly for my deadly rival to take a ride on with her while I languish in durance in this detestable Kokkopola County jail for cow stealin'!

Susie has rid around in front of the jail.

She's laughin'.

Lafe is laughin', too.

"I brang it, Lafe," Susie just said; "it's kind of raw, but Mike says it's good stuff!"

All I can do is hope to Gawd it's wood alcohol, or better still, strychnine. And if it is, I hope to Gawd also that Lafe takes a big drink to start with. I guess he's takin' it—they ain't makin' any noise out in front of the jail.

The silence is awful—I wonder if Susie's takin' a drink, too! I feel like I was gettin' the hydrophobia. I wish to Gawd I was, and could bite both of them!

There's another scorpion crawlin' on the floor. I ain't goin' to squash it. Maybe it'll crawl out and bite Lafe Barrilla! Gawd I wish that silence would end! My imagination is too anguishin'! If Susie's takin' a drink, Gawd help her.

Old Yallerbelly has just snuffled. It sounded like a bunch of firecrackers in a wooden water bucket But it was a relief. Anything's a relief from the torture of thinkin'—

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Somebody's comin'! I can hear them!

If it's Lafe Barrilla bringin' my supper I'm goin' to reach through the bars and grab him by the throat and choke him till he falls dead and gaspin' to the floor! When I've killed Lafe I'll haunt Susie to my dyin' day.

Oh, Susie, Susie, if you knowed how much a man can think about durin' thirteen horrible days in the Kokkopola County jail for cow stealin'. Oh, Susie, Susie, in spite of all your cruel heartbreakin' treacherousness I'm still a damn fool about you, an' whatever happens—if I don't succeed in killin' Lafe, but he gets me—whatever transpires, remember, oh, Susie, remember I died—

In the middle of a sentence the manuscript ended.

As per schedule, Pap Johnson arrived at the Kokkopola County jail the following morning. He unlocked the door. Went in, and, as he expected, found Lafe Barrilla in a deadly stupor on the cold hard floor of the jail.

A bottle was sitting beside Lafe. Over by the wall a scorpion crouched. Pap smashed the scorpion, picked up the bottle, smelled of it—

"Gawd," he chuckled, "she give him laudanum enough to make him sleep a week! I hope he comes out of it!"

Then Pap picked up the scattered sheets of paper, read them, and laughed again.

"Susie ought to be spanked," he said, still laughing, "to hatch up a scheme like that an' torment a man the way she's tormented that poor darn fool just so she can pull a romantic rescue on him! She'll get an awful kick out of makin' him think he's a fugitive from justice till their honeymoon is over!"

Pap looked quizzically down at Lafe.

"In a show-down," he murmured, "I don't know whether it's heller on Jeff or heller on Lafe! But— In either event, as usual, the woman has had her way!"

THE END

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GRATITUDE

I SAW him standing in the dock
Where I should be;
The sentence gave him ne'er a shock
That I could see.
I saw him leave the awful dock
With dignity;
Gently he smiled to mock
The tears of me.

He took my place, and saved our name,
And spared an honored house the shame
Of my rank villainy.
Who'd ever think that man could be
Unselfishly so strong?
Who'd ever dream that willingly
A man should suffer wrong?

In ten years' time, a ghost alive, the gaunt gray man appears,
But how can human gratitude survive so many years?

James S. Ryan.
10 A

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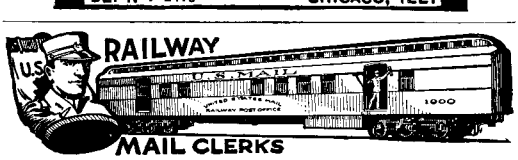

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